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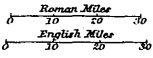
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THE KINGDOMS OF  
JUDAH AND ISRAEL



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OF  
ELIJAH AND ELISHA

PROPHETS OF ISRAEL

BY

THE REV. RONALD G. MACINTYRE, B.D.

"  
MAXWELLTOWN

IMPORTED BY  
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS,  
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To

MY OLD SABBATH-SCHOOL TEACHER AND FRIEND,

DANIEL MACLEISH, Esq.,

FORT-WILLIAM.



**NOTE.****WELFARE OF YOUTH EXAMINATIONS.**

SENIORS *will take the whole book.*

*The MIDDLE GRADE will take from the words "And Elijah the Tishbite" in the middle of page 11 to the end of Chapter VI., omitting the foot-notes and also paragraphs 29, 30, 31, 32, 37, 38, 39.*

*The JUNIOR GRADE will take what is prescribed for the MIDDLE GRADE, but with the further omission of Chapter VI.*

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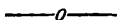
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# ELIJAH AND ELISHA, PROPHETS OF ISRAEL.



## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTORY.

I. CIVIL CONDITION OF ISRAEL. About sixty years had passed since the Kingdom was broken into two, and Jeroboam became ruler over the Northern section. During that period there were only short intervals of peace, either within or without the Kingdom. King followed king in rapid succession, the advent of each being the signal for the massacre of the relatives and adherents of his predecessor. Jeroboam was succeeded by his son Nadab. After reigning two years Nadab was slain by the usurper Baasha, who exterminated the family of Jeroboam. Baasha was succeeded by his son Elah, who in the second year of his reign was murdered by Zimri, and the latter, following the merciless policy of the East, slew all the family of Baasha. Zimri enjoyed power only for seven days, when he was besieged by Omri; and to save falling into the hands of his opponent, he set fire to the royal palace, and perished in the flames. After a

war of four years with another claimant, Tibni, Omri established himself firmly as King, and by his victory over Moab increased the military consequence of Israel. In his time the seat of the Kingdom was removed from Tirzah to the hill of Shomeron, or Samaria, on which he built the city of Samaria. Henceforth, through all changes in the Northern Kingdom, Samaria remained the capital. Omri was succeeded by his son Ahab, the seventh king of the separate Kingdom, and he reigned for a period of about twenty years. The son was not wanting in the qualities which won his father the Kingdom. He was brave, a good military leader, and something of a statesman. His chief aim seems to have been to preserve his kingdom from invasion, and develop trade and the arts of peace, especially architecture. His one danger was the growing Syrian power with Damascus as its centre; and any alliance with nations to the North, such as Tyre, which had also this danger to reckon with, would seem to him to be a wise policy. As Solomon sought to enhance his greatness by marriage with a daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt, so Ahab strengthened himself by alliance with the house of Ethbaal, King of Tyre. Such alliances were against the command of God, and invariably resulted in evil and sorrow to the land.

## 2. RELIGIOUS CONDITION OF ISRAEL.

When the disruption of the Kingdom took place, Jeroboam knew that it would never suit his objects if the people were to go to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. He therefore set up two golden calves at the extreme points of his Kingdom, Dan and

Bethel, saying to the people : " It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem ; behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." (Comp. Ex. xxxii. 4.) Partly by the necessities of this step, seeing that the Levites would not consent to serve, probably also for the sake of popularity, he took priests from among all the tribes who followed him, and from among the lowest of the people. This policy of Jeroboam stands out in the religious history of Israel as the starting-point of departures from the pure worship of Jehovah (2 Kings x. 29, xiii. 2, xv. 9). The policy was one prescribed by statecraft, and the intention was not so much to reject Jehovah as God, as to worship Him under the form of these symbols. The practice was not unknown in the time of the Judges, and the symbols chosen pointed to the depraved worship of Egypt and other heathen nations. There was probably a section of the people all through the early history in Canaan who practised a worship not very different from that set up by Jeroboam, but hitherto nothing of this kind had received the support of the State.

The reign of Ahab marked the first results of this policy. The regard for the true God had been much lessened during the half century which intervened, and the way was prepared for the substitution of Baal. Ahab perhaps might have continued in the ways of his predecessors, for he does not seem himself to have positively rejected Jehovah. But the advent of Jezebel quickened the tendency to this corrupt worship, and the rejection of Jehovah as God speedily followed. It may

have seemed to Ahab more than a question of religion, for the whole history of the Northern Kingdom gathers round the struggle between the prophets and the Crown. At one stroke he would carry forward the policy of these past years, fulfil the desire of Jezebel, and rid himself of the one power in the land which dared to oppose the royal prerogative and demand that the voice of God be heard by people and by king. Baal worship was therefore adopted as the State religion, and the effort of the strong-minded Queen was to compel the whole people to follow the practice of the Court. A section was only too ready to fall in with this departure, and rejoiced in the royal approval of customs which already existed. But a considerable number of the people remained true to the old faith, and the prophets formed a strong body in opposition. Against these the wrath of Jezebel broke out, and the persecution grew so hot that all were compelled to be silent or to seek concealment (1 Kings xviii. 13), with one exception.

It is noteworthy that the persecution which followed the advent of Jezebel was less against the worshippers of Jehovah as such, than against the prophetic guild. Obadiah, Naboth, and others who remained true to Jehovah seem not to have suffered in any way for their faith. Political quite as much as religious considerations were at the root of the conflict between the prophets and the crown; politics and religion indeed were very closely intertwined. The success of the prophets would have meant the limitation of Crown prerogatives, as well as the adoption of a State policy, especially in foreign

affairs, contrary to that which Ahab and his house represented.

3. **FIRST APPEARANCE OF ELIJAH** (1 Kings xvii. 1). Ahab had already built a splendid palace for himself in Samaria—"the Ivory House"; and now, under the influence of Jezebel, he built an equally splendid Temple of Baal (with probably another in Jezreel), and set up in front of it "Asherah," probably a sacred tree or pole representative of the worship of Ashtoreth, the goddess associated with the worship of Baal. A time had now come in the history of God's chosen people when "either Israel must forever forfeit its place among the nations, and in the religious history of the world, or the Almighty must interpose and show Himself as He is, the only living and true God, the God of holiness and righteousness" (Milligan).

"And Elijah the Tishbite,<sup>a</sup> who was of the sojourners of Gilead, said unto Ahab" (R.V.). Thus suddenly is the Reformer introduced, who was to cope with the fierce spirit of Asiatic heathenism. The Hebrew form of the name—Elijahu (Jehovah is my God)—proclaimed the mission of the prophet. Of his personal appearance we have scant information. Tradition says he was a man of short stature and rugged countenance, with the long flowing hair of a Nazarite. In 2 Kings i. 8 he is described as "an hairy man and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins." As the marginal rendering of the R.V. indicates, this may refer to the garment of

<sup>a</sup> Josephus says that Elijah was of "a town Thesbone, in the country of Gilead."



goat's or camel's hair which the prophet wore, and which afterwards became the typical dress of the prophets of Jehovah, or those who professed to be so (Matthew iii. 4 ; Zech. xiii. 4).

So vague is the information as to Elijah's birth-place that all kinds of suggestions have been made, even that he was of Kenite origin and not of the race of Israel. For this there is very little to say. The one thing certain is that he dwelt somewhere in the extensive region on the east side of Jordan, known by the name of Gilead.<sup>a</sup> The Gileadites were the Highlanders of Palestine, and the whole bearing of Elijah speaks of the unconventional manners and the free life of a man brought up amid such surroundings. The impetuosity, the seasons of high daring, and again of deep depression, are characteristic of the life of a mountainous race. The sudden appearance of a man of this kind amid the ease and luxury of Ahab's Court startled all. Before they realised what his coming meant, he had delivered his message and was gone.

There is probably no finer picture in history than this of the apostate king in the pomp and adulation of his Court, suddenly brought face to face with the stern prophet of the Lord, who came to him in the simple dress and with the bold bearing of a son of the mountain and the desert. Sudden appearances at

<sup>a</sup> Gilead had already supplied two judges to Israel, Jair and Jephthah. "We find in Gilead, from the earliest times to the Assyrian Captivity, Hebrew communities, centres and rallying places for Hebrew dynasties, Hebrew character and heroism, with prophecy the distinctive glory of Hebrew life."—Smith's "Historical Geography of the Holy Land."

critical moments and swift withdrawals into retirement were characteristic of Elijah's ministry. They add much to the romance of his story and the fascination of his personality.

4. HIS MESSAGE (1 Kings xvii. 1-2 : *cf.* Luke iv. 25 ; James v. 17). The drought with which Elijah threatened Ahab and his Court was the recognised Divine punishment of apostasy (Deut. xi. 16-17). It was a penalty which many in Israel, if not Ahab himself, would understand. If any doubt could linger in the mind of Ahab as to the meaning of this warning, the announcement of Elijah that he came in the name of "Jehovah, the God of Israel," proclaimed at once that God demanded the recognition of His true place in the life of the nation, and would by no means give His glory to another. From New Testament references (Luke iv. 25, James v. 17) we learn that this drought lasted for a period of three and a half years—a period long enough to have brought terrible sufferings upon the nation. No sooner was the message delivered than Elijah passed out of sight of the Court—whether assembled in Samaria or in Jezreel we know not—and hastened eastward to the shelter of his own Gilead. There he was safe from the resentment of Ahab or the persecuting zeal of Jezebel. There he could learn the effects of his first public act, and prepare himself for further service in the cause of Jehovah.

5. BY THE BROOK CHERITH (1 Kings xvii. 2-7). Having fulfilled his first mission, he was commanded to seek an appointed shelter, where he might learn that God's care is ever over those

who do His will. The exact position of Cherith is unknown, though from Elijah's evident acquaintance with the locality indicated, it is most likely to have been in his own Gilead.<sup>a</sup> Wherever the locality, the chief thing was that the Brook Cherith provided a secure retreat under the shadow of its high cliffs, while the servants of Ahab were already on the hunt for the man who had dared to deliver such a message, and to oppose himself to the royal policy. While the brook would provide him with a safe retreat and with water to drink, he was to be fed by ravens. This interesting narrative of the feeding by the ravens has been explained in different ways. The Hebrew word translated "ravens" admits of being read in more than one way, and so some have supposed that here it really means "Arabians." But the suggestion raises more difficulties than it lays, and is altogether improbable. Others have thought that it should be translated "merchants." But what would merchants be doing by the Brook Cherith, and why should they come twice a day for a period covering some months? Others would render it "people of Oreb" (Hebrew, *Orebim*). But it would be necessary to prove that Cherith was near to Oreb, and even then difficulties would remain. So far as the actual words of Scripture are concerned, the ordinary rendering, "ravens," most commends itself, and in whatever way we understand the incident, the lesson of it at least is clear — that God cares for His servant in times when ordinary means fail.

<sup>a</sup> Smith's "Historical Geography of the Holy Land," p. 580.

How long he may have continued by the Brook Cherith we are not told. But the drought became so intense that the supply of water at length altogether ceased. Elijah, however, would in the meantime have learned a lesson for the hard days to come, namely, that Jehovah would not forsake him in the work to which he was called, and that he was under the Divine guardianship. As the brook dried up he would learn fellowship with his race in suffering. They had turned away from God, and Elijah, though he had remained true, was not without experience of what Israel had to endure. God's minister must share the pains of the people whom he would save.

6. ZAREPHATH (1 Kings xvii. 8-9). "Arise, get thee to Zarephath." It must have seemed strange to Elijah that he should be directed to undertake a long and perilous journey (for Ahab was already in search of him) to the far North. For Zarephath was a small Phoenician town between Tyre and Sidon, supposed to be represented by the modern Surafend. It would be a most unlikely place in which to find the prophet. For this reason it would be safer than any town within the Kingdom of Israel. But it was not for purposes of concealment only, that he was to go there. He was to learn lessons there, that would fit him for the great place he was yet to occupy in defending the ancient system against the assumptions of the Crown. Surrounded by Baal worship, he would know more clearly the nature of the religion against which he had to contend; and being the chosen champion of Jehovah as the God of Israel, he might even now

begin to understand that God had an interest in more than the people of Israel, and that His plan had a wider range than the race of Abraham. Peter was taught to call nothing common or unclean by a vision from heaven. Elijah was to learn it by contact with those outside the covenant of promise. Fragmentary as the story is, it makes it at least clear that Elijah recognised in Jehovah not only the God of a particular race, but the one only living and true God, who had taken Israel into his special care, and laid upon them special obligations. It is not a wider tolerance—of that there is no evidence—but a wider conception of Jehovah as God, that the prophet gained.

7. THE WIDOW WOMAN (1 Kings xvii. 10-16 ; Luke iv. 25, 26). When Elijah approached the gate of the city he saw a woman gathering sticks, and probably recognised by her dress that she was a widow. Believing that this might be the "widow woman" to whom he had been sent, he called to her, "Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." The water famine would not yet be so keenly felt in the far North, near the great mountain ranges of Lebanon. So the woman was able and ready to comply with the request. As she turned to obey, Elijah added, "Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand." This request recalled her sorrowful condition, so that she turned again to look at the man who made it, and her closer scrutiny revealed that he was an Israelite. It is not likely, however, that she recognised in him more than this. Her answer disclosed the terrible pressure of the

famine.<sup>a</sup> She had just the meal and oil (the olive oil of the country) for her last baking. Thereafter she looked for nothing but death for her son and herself.

Here was the widow to whom the Lord had directed Elijah. He bade her go and do as he had said. At the same time he strengthened her faith by the promise that the meal and oil would not fail until rain came again upon the earth. Already the lesson of Cherith was bearing fruit. He could think of it and assure this woman that God would provide for all her wants; and the supplies were sufficient for her house as well as for the prophet and herself for many days.

Neither here nor in our Lord's reference to the woman (Luke iv. 26) is it said that she was a worshipper of Baal. It has been suggested, therefore, that she was an Israelitish woman who had been married to a Phoenician. But there is nothing to support this view. It is true that her oath was in the name of Jehovah. But there is nothing unlikely in a Phoenician woman having some knowledge of the God of Israel, especially at this period in the history of both nations. The way in which our Lord makes use of the incident appears to favour the view that she was not a worshipper of Jehovah. What she may have become before Elijah left her is another question.

**8. STAY IN ZAREPHATH.** It is probable that Elijah spent nearly two years in Zarephath, but we have no indication of how this time was occupied.

<sup>a</sup> Josephus quotes an account of a severe drought, lasting a year, during the reign of the Tyrian king, Ithobal, the contemporary of Ahab.

No doubt he would watch with keen interest the progress of events in Israel, and eagerly listen to reports which might come to him from the Court of Ahab. It is not unlikely that he made his way more than once across the border, to learn for himself the progress of the famine and the effect upon the people. Carmel seems to have been a favourite haunt of the "sons of the prophets," and it would be comparatively easy for Elijah to make his way along the coast, and once there, he would find shelter in some of its numerous caves. If such visits were made, they must have been in secret; for we learn that the land was searched from one end to the other for the daring servant of God. Messengers were even dispatched to the neighbouring kingdoms in the hope of laying hold upon him, not only because the king's wrath burned against him, but in order to induce or compel him to remove the curse which in the name of Jehovah he had pronounced upon the land. That search would naturally be all the keener as the famine became heavier. On Elijah's part the period was one of solemn waiting for the next move in a conflict in which he held himself wholly under the commands of his God. Without His word he would attempt nothing. His daily prayer was answered by a daily miracle of God's providence in the continued supply of meal and oil. His trust in God was correspondingly strengthened, and the man himself was being prepared for a stronger confidence and a greater act of faith.

9. THE WIDOW'S SON (1 Kings xvii. 17-24).  
Only once are we admitted to the widow's home.

Her son fell sick unto death. As the ordinary Hebrew word for "dead" is not here used, it has been maintained that the boy was not actually dead, but only at the point of death. But the tenor of the passage, and especially the words of the mother herself, are almost decisive in favour of the view that death had already come to the boy. The widow in an outburst of motherly grief turned upon the prophet with the appeal, "Thou art come unto me to bring my sin to remembrance and to slay my son."<sup>a</sup> This is often taken to mean that the presence of the man of God had made her own sinful nature clear to her—that in the light of his holy life conscience had flashed its judgment upon her. But it is much more probable that the woman meant that Elijah, whom she recognised as "a man of God," and therefore as one having close intercourse with Jehovah, had brought her sin to the remembrance of God, with the result that God had visited her with this heavy penalty. She had given hospitality to this stranger from Israel, and the result was that he had brought to Jehovah's mind her sin; of which she herself, too, was no doubt made more conscious by the presence of the servant of the God of Righteousness. Therefore when Elijah took the body up to his own chamber, his prayer turned on the law of hospitality so sacred in the East, "the widow with whom I sojourn." His own sympathy would also be touched by the cry of the widowed mother in the greatest sorrow which could come upon her. In that "upper room" he took another and bolder flight, and prayed that the "child's soul come into

<sup>a</sup> The sentence may be taken either as affirmative or as interrogative.



him again." Faith won its victory and had its reward, as "the soul of the child came into him again and he revived."<sup>a</sup>

It was with a glad recognition that the mother acknowledged Elijah to be "a man of God"—the prophet of a God greater than any of the gods of her own nation, and the word of the Lord spoken by him to be truth. To her the incident became the occasion of the birth of a new faith.

**10. PREPARATION FOR THE GREAT STRUGGLE.** During the three years and a half which the drought covered, Elijah was in hiding. It was a time of waiting; and the glimpses we get of the prophet by the Brook Cherith and in Zarephath do not tell us much. They suggest more than they tell. Character is sometimes built more rapidly and solidly in the stillness of waiting than in the storm of activity. The river makes its way to the sea in the quiet as in the rushing waters. The Elijah who once again confronted Ahab, and flung his challenge in the face of Baal's prophets, was a man of wider spiritual vision, and greater possibilities of faith, than he who had burst across Jordan from the wilds of Gilead to the court of the king. As he heard the widow of Zarephath confessing the name of Jehovah, and saw the daylight of faith breaking through the heathen darkness, there came to him a widening revelation of the kingdom of God, and a truer conception of the Lord's far-reaching care and pity. The daily miracle of the meal and the oil raised his faith beyond all

<sup>a</sup> Jewish tradition says that the boy afterwards became the servant (or disciple) of Elijah, and known to later history as the prophet Jonah.

doubting. And now this last incident opened the wellspring of pity in the man's heart, and prepared him to enter with sympathetic feeling into the misery of famine-stricken Israel. Further, the miracle in the upper room revealed to him the power of believing prayer, and fitted him for the next and greatest step in his life's work. The effect of that answer to prayer was afterwards to be seen in the same man, when he stood by the altar of unhewn stone at Carmel, and bowed with his face between his knees on the hill-top.

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## CHAPTER II.

II. THE RETURN TO ISRAEL (1 Kings xviii. 1-2). It is doubtful how long Elijah remained in Zarephath. The chronology of the prophet's life is never very exact. Our narrative only tells us that he left after being there "many days," and in "the third year" from his first appearance to Ahab. In the references by our Lord (Luke iv. 25) and St James (v. 17), the drought is said to have lasted three years and six months. Much difficulty has been found in reconciling what is said in Kings with the definite statements in the New Testament. If the words in both cases refer to the *duration* of the drought, then it is certainly not easy to reconcile them, and only a knowledge of the method of calculation and the point of view in each case, would bring us near a solution. It has been suggested<sup>a</sup> that, while the heavens were "shut up" for three

<sup>a</sup> Lange. Com. *in loco*.

years and six months, the famine would not be felt for some time after the drought began, and, therefore, from the beginning of the *famine* till the return of rain may be covered by the period "in the third year." This explanation is not satisfactory, and the same must be said of another,<sup>a</sup> which takes the three and a half years as merely a large Eastern way of speaking. The statements in the New Testament are quite definite that the drought lasted three years and six months. In the story in 1 Kings we are really never told how long the drought continued. Had the earlier history of Elijah been preserved to us, it is probable we should find that the drought had begun some time before his appearance at the Court of Ahab. For when he does appear, it is not to proclaim the beginning of the drought, but to declare that it was the work of Jehovah, and that it would not end except according to the word spoken by the servant of Jehovah. The difficulty has arisen from assuming that "in the third year" (1 Kings xviii. 1) dates from the beginning of the drought, whereas it refers to the period between the first appearance of Elijah to Ahab and his second visit. The statements in the Old and New Testament give reckonings from different points in the history.

12. OBADIAH (1 Kings xviii. 3-16). The intensity of the famine can be judged by the fact that its effects were felt even in the palace of the King. How much the mass of the people must have suffered we can only imagine. Such was the distress, that a last effort had to be made to save alive even a few of

<sup>a</sup> Milligan, "Elijah."

the Royal horses and mules, and so urgent was the task, that the King himself must share in it. Dividing the land between himself and the Governor or Chamberlain of the Royal household, Obadiah by name, they searched for valleys and wells where forage and water might be obtained. We get a new glimpse of the character of Ahab, as well as of the nature of the persecution, in that he retained about his person a man such as Obadiah, who was a devoted worshipper of Jehovah. This is one of several indications that Ahab was not himself a zealous worshipper of Baal, and that the fierceness of the persecution, on its religious side, was rather due to Jezebel. How keen and far-reaching that persecution was, is evident from the story told of Obadiah. He had taken two bands of fifty of "the prophets of the Lord," and hid them in caves, possibly about Mount Carmel,<sup>a</sup> providing them there with bread and water. There is nothing to indicate that this was during the years of famine. Indeed, it could hardly have been so. It must rather have been during the persecution which preceded. The story is evidence of Obadiah's allegiance to Jehovah, and of the strength of character which made him prepared to run the risks of such a deed.

To this man, wandering about alone in search of forage, Elijah now presented himself. Obadiah was startled at the unexpected meeting, for he did not fail to recognise that this was the prophet for whom Ahab has been so diligently searching, and whose appearance had come to be looked upon as the herald of national calamity. Whether or not

<sup>a</sup> Amos ix. 3.

Obadiah had seen the prophet when he burst upon the Court of Ahab, the striking appearance of the man who had announced the vengeance of God upon Israel was too well known to every one about the Court. "Art thou that my lord Elijah" is therefore an exclamation of surprise, mingled with fear, rather than of doubt. To Obadiah the appearance of Elijah would bring the terror of the living God, with the fear that the prophet would include the servant in the master's evil-doing. When the prophet therefore commanded Obadiah, "go, tell thy lord, behold Elijah is here," the command was interpreted only as a means of bringing down punishment upon the messenger. He knew the determination of Ahab to slay Elijah; for had not Ahab searched "in every nation and kingdom" for word of the prophet? But he was also confident that God would not permit Elijah to fall into the King's hands. The result would be that the King, in his disappointment at being so near, and yet missing his prey, would order the death of Obadiah, the instrument of the disappointment. With this consciousness, Obadiah pleaded his past record as on the side of the persecuted, not of the persecutor, and therefore entitling him to consideration at the hands of the man of God. The solemn assurance of Elijah, that he meant to abide the presence of Ahab, at length satisfied Obadiah, "who went to meet Ahab, and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah."

13. ELIJAH AND AHAB (1 Kings xviii. 17-20). Whatever vengeance Ahab had threatened and intended, when he came face to face with the man

who was conscious of being there by the command of Jehovah, he could only meet him with the reproach, "Art thou he that troubleth Israel?" The sight of the nation's misery as he wandered in search of forage gave bitterness to this reproach. But the memory of what he had seen was flung back upon himself in the retort, "I have not troubled Israel, but thou, and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of Jehovah, and thou hast followed Baalim." Ahab would make the messenger of God responsible for miseries which were due to his own evil ways. But Elijah's main purpose now was to bring the conflict between Jehovah and Baal to a final test, and that of such a kind as to complete the conviction which the years of famine and suffering were bringing home to the mind of the people. For this purpose he proposed to meet "all Israel," that is, the representatives from all parts of the kingdom, upon Mount Carmel, where the truth and power of Jehovah, and the falsity and helplessness of Baal, should be made evident, and that too in the region of natural phenomena over which Baal was supposed specially to preside. He himself would represent Jehovah, and Baal could be represented by the full strength of the priesthood, including the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 priests of the Asherah, the latter of whom were under the special protection and patronage of Jezebel. Ahab was at once prepared to settle the question in this way, seeing in it some prospect of ending the terrible famine. "He was a speculative idolator rather than a cruel persecutor."<sup>a</sup> He probably cared little which side won,

<sup>a</sup> Parker's "People's Bible."

so long as he was spared trouble in his kingdom. He had yielded to Jezebel, because that seemed the path of least resistance. He was ready now, for the same reason, to yield to the challenge of Elijah. His care was for the political strength of his kingdom rather than its religious purity. On the other hand, the proposal could not possibly meet with the approval of Jezebel. The national acknowledgment of Jehovah as the God of Israel would mean the downfall of Baal worship, to which her early training, and the fact that her father had been a Priest of Baal as well as King of Tyre, made her devotedly attached. It would mean also that her own position and influence in the Kingdom would be seriously threatened. This is probably the reason why the priests who were directly under her control were not present at Carmel, and so escaped the fate meted out at the Brook Kishon.

14. **THE PLACE OF MEETING.** The place chosen to vindicate "the Deity who was character against the deity who was not" was peculiarly suitable. "Throughout the Old Testament, Carmel appears either as a symbol or as a sanctuary."<sup>a</sup> At this time it was probably a chief site of Baal worship, but had previously been used for the worship of Jehovah, the ruins of whose Altar Elijah rebuilt. Carmel had no political or military importance, and although such a landmark in the province of Samaria, it was sometimes reckoned to Galilee, sometimes held by Tyre. The range of hills is about twelve miles long, and divides the

<sup>a</sup> Smith's "Historical Geography of the Holy Land," pp. 338-341 (third edition).

plain of Sharon from the Western portion of the plain of Esdraelon. Its highest point is about 1740 feet, its north-west end sweeping out to meet the sea and ending in a bluff about 500 feet high. The name itself signifies "Garden," and throughout the Old Testament it is noted for its luxuriant fruitfulness. The "excellency" of Carmel is the symbol of beauty, the "withering" of Carmel the symbol of hopeless desolation. The actual scene of the meeting which was to have so memorable a place in the history of Israel, was perhaps a little below the eastern summit of the ridge. It was probably a terrace of natural rock, which commands a fine view of the plains and lakes, the hills of Galilee, and the windings of Kishon, with Jezreel glimmering in the distance under the shadow of Gilboa. The remains of an old and massive square structure here visible, and called El-Muhrakkah—the "burning" or "sacrifice"—are thought to mark the site of Elijah's Altar.

15. THE ISSUE AT STAKE. The people of Israel had a great past linked to the name of Jehovah. Their faith in the One God had made of them a nation, and was full of blessing for the future of the world. They themselves had not been eager to forsake Jehovah, or to worship Baal; for they could not be forgetful of all they owed to the God who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. But they had allowed themselves to be led or coerced into the recognition of Baal as God, and now they fell in with the worship of Baal as the religion dictated by the State, without perhaps formally denying Jehovah.



The efforts of Elijah and the "sons of the prophets" were directed to laying bare the absolute antagonism between the pure worship of Jehovah and the corrupt worship of Baal. A divided homage was just the danger against which Israel had been specially warned, and which could have only one ending if persisted in. They would cut themselves adrift from their own memorable past. They would refuse the future which Jehovah had promised them. Righteousness, which was the foundation of the worship of Jehovah, would fade away, and they themselves would speedily sink to the level of the surrounding nations, and perish with them. "It was by the righteous character of His rule, not by the mere fact of His being a Ruler, that the God of Israel differed from the God of the peoples of the same family and speaking kindred tongues, such as Phoenicians, Sidonians, Canaanites." "Baal was not a righteous, holy ruler, favouring righteousness and purity, and hating iniquity. He was an immoral divinity; his worship was a foul, vile, brutal thing, a horror to think of, a shame to speak of, outraging decency and the sacred instincts of humanity."<sup>a</sup>

The patriotism as well as the religious faith of Elijah blazed out against the people's madness. There is a tone of impatience, therefore, with their folly in the words with which Elijah addressed them. It is also noteworthy that Elijah ignored the presence of Ahab, and appealed directly to the people. This was not only because of the

<sup>a</sup> Prof. Bruce, in the "Expositor." First Series, vol. x.

uselessness of appealing to Ahab, who judged all questions from the political standpoint, and would always favour a compromise, but because Jehovah was still the real King of Israel to whom the people owed a direct allegiance. Underlying this is the wider principle that in questions of Faith the people have a right to make their own decision on their own responsibility. Religion is not State-made.

16. THE GOD WHO IS NOT (I Kings xviii. 21-29). The conditions of the contest as laid down by Elijah were all in favour of Baal. The prophets of Baal were 450. For Jehovah there stood but one prophet. Then Baal was the sun-god, and the decisive answer was to be by fire. The terms of the challenge were laid before the people, and they, as jury in this great trial of religions, signified their approval. There was no escape, and the prophets of Baal, obtaining precedence by request of Elijah, prepared the sacrifice, and laid it upon the Altar. It was still early in the day when the preparations were completed, and the cry began, "O Baal, hear us." The people at first waited in breathless expectation, but as minutes and hours went by in the vain appeal, their expectancy began to lose its edge and they became curious, if not indignant, watchers. Elijah stood apart in scornful silence. The sun rose to meridian, and there was no reply, though the importunity of the prophets increased as they whirled about the altar in sacrificial dance. Noon-day was surely the time for the sun-god to manifest his power, and there being "no voice nor any that

answered," the grim silence of Elijah was at length broken.

The wild and degrading appeal to a god who was not, fired the wrath of the prophet against that which had worked such havoc to his country. Was this the religion for which Israel had turned her back upon Jehovah? And Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing; or he is gone aside; or he is in a journey; or, peradventure, he sleepeth and must be awaked" (R.V.). There can be no question of the "savage humour" and the "biting sarcasm" of these words.<sup>a</sup> To a man in the circumstances of Elijah, sarcasm may be a just weapon.<sup>b</sup> Of its effectiveness at least on this occasion, there is no question. It stung the prophets of Baal into an even wilder fury, "so that they cut themselves with swords and lances till the blood gushed out upon them." This was the climax of heathen frenzy, for if the sight of the sacred blood of his priests would not move their god, their last appeal had been made. The horrible incantation went on till the time of the "evening oblation." Then, as the sun was passing from view as if in mockery of their appeal, and no answering fire came, the defeat of Baal was beyond all question; and the exhausted, blood-smeared priests gave place to the lonely prophet of Jehovah.

17. THE GOD WHO IS (1 Kings xviii. 30-39). Baal was proved to be no god. It remained to prove that Jehovah was not as Baal. The first act of Elijah was indicative of his mission. "He repaired the

<sup>a</sup> Stanley, "Jewish Church."

<sup>b</sup> Isaiah, xli. 7, xliv. 8-20; Jer. x. 3-5.

altar of the Lord that was thrown down." His work was to bring the nation back to their allegiance, to the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Israel. Having prepared the sacrifice, he took care to guard against the charge of deception, by ordering water to be poured again and again over the sacrifice and the wood, till all was thoroughly soaked, and even the trench dug round the altar was filled with the water.<sup>a</sup> Heathen priests were quite familiar with all manner of deceptions practised upon worshippers, and Elijah was determined that the possibility of such a charge in his case should be put beyond all question. Having settled these preliminaries, the prophet offered up a simple, earnest prayer to Jehovah, and immediately the answer came in such power, that the fire "consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench." The effect upon the people was immediate and decisive; "they fell on their faces, and said, Jehovah, He is God; Jehovah, He is God." The verdict was the unanimous voice of the people, returning to their true Covenant relation with God.

Again and again in later times did kings of Israel walk in the ways of Jeroboam, but never again did Baal-worship regain that ascendancy in Israel which it had in the days of Ahab. Israel

<sup>a</sup> The capacity of the trench is given as a two-seah measure, an unusual term as applied to liquid capacity. The seah was the ordinary dry measure for domestic purposes, and is about one-third of an Ephah. In this sense the trench would contain about three gallons. It may, however, be that the measure is given here, not as one of capacity but as one of depth,—as deep as a two-seah measure, which would convey a perfectly clear idea to those who used such a measure.

loved to dwell on the clear answer at Carmel. The figure of Elijah standing as a great rock against the drift of heathenism impressed itself upon the imagination of later generations, and became a restraining conscience.

18. **THE HOUR OF JUDGMENT** (1 Kings xviii. 40). Elijah did not consider that his work was complete so long as the priests of Baal remained in the land. The new-fired zeal of the people was called into requisition in visiting upon their deceivers the penalty named in the Law which it was Elijah's mission to restore (Deut. xiii. 6-9).

The 450 priests were hurried down the side of Carmel to the Brook Kishon, and there one and all were slaughtered. That swift and terrible deed must not be reckoned the result of blind rage, but a solemn act of judgment. These men were not only priests of a false and degrading religion, but sinners against the State. The Spirit of Jesus teaches us to overcome by love and not by the sword; but the power of love could not be fully known till the God who is Love came among men, and taught them the new and better way. Israel was still in principle a Theocracy,<sup>a</sup> and the deeds of those priests would be judged as acts of rebellion against the Sovereign power; a crime for which the death penalty is written in the law of every nation in Christian Europe.

19. **THE END OF THE DROUGHT** (1 Kings xviii. 41). Baal was defeated, and Jehovah was again acknowledged God in Israel. The purpose of the drought was fulfilled, and the removal of the

<sup>a</sup> *i.e.* "Government by immediate direction of God."

penalty would now be the sign of the peoples' reception once again into the favour of Jehovah, their true God. Elijah, therefore, knew that the return of rain was near at hand, and in that belief he bade Ahab rise and eat. Some have thought that this meant that the King was to ascend again the side of Carmel and refresh himself in his tent after the long day's fasting;<sup>a</sup> others, that he was "to eat of the sacrifice offered to Jehovah and thereby strengthen himself."<sup>b</sup> The words have also been understood as spoken in derision of the luxury-loving, easy-going King.<sup>c</sup> But they are best understood as simply the poetic Eastern method of announcing to the King the end of the drought, that his anxieties were over, and that he could now proceed to Jezreel with an easy mind. The day of sorrow and privation was past; the day of joy and feasting had come.

20. THE PRAYER OF FAITH (1 Kings xviii. 42-49). While Elijah heard in faith the sound of abundance of rain, he knew that it would come according to his word. He retired therefore to the top of the hill, where he would be away from the bustle of king and people and alone with God. There he continued in prayer until his servant, after a seventh visit to a higher point, was able to tell him that away on the western horizon there appeared "a cloud out of the sea as small as a man's hand"<sup>d</sup> (R.V.). To the servant this may have

<sup>a</sup> Farrar.

<sup>b</sup> Ewald.

<sup>c</sup> Krummacher.

<sup>d</sup> "Carmel is the first of Israel's hills to meet the rain, and they give him of their best."—Smith's "Historical Geography of the Holy Land."

promised little. To Elijah it was the assurance of a gracious response. Elijah praying at the altar before the people for fire from heaven, and again on the hill-top alone praying for rain, is an impressive figure suggestive of much. The response in the one case was (for obvious reasons) immediate ; in the other it was delayed. But the main point is, that to fervent, believing prayer, the answer in each case came. If we believe God rules, in any real sense, in the physical as in the spiritual world, there can be no stumbling-block in such answers to prayer as came to Elijah. The secret of all such answers is, that the Spirit of God makes intercession through His saints "according to the will of God,"<sup>a</sup> and that such divinely taught prayer moves on the lines of Divine Providence. Prayer never can mean asking the Almighty to change His mind for ours. "True prayer never comes home weeping, for we either get what we ask or what we ought to have asked" (Bp. Hall).

With the first signs of the coming rain, Elijah sent a message to Ahab to hasten his departure for Jezreel lest he should be storm-stayed.

The prophet himself, with God-given power, ran before the chariot of the king right up to the gates of Jezreel—a distance of about fifteen miles. Elijah no doubt took upon himself this duty as a token of respect for Israel's covenanted king, who, with his people, had now acknowledged Jehovah as the God of Israel. He might well have thought that in the acknowledgment of that day Ahab was once more the servant and repre-

<sup>a</sup> Romans viii. 26-27.

sentative of Jehovah in the theocracy of Israel; and in the dawn of the new and better day, which the verdict of the assembled people seemed to have ushered in, the prophet of Jehovah was ready to signify, in a way so characteristic of a Gileadite, the oneness of Jehovah with the reformed nation.

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### CHAPTER III.

**21. ELIJAH'S FLIGHT** (1 Kings xix. 1-8). Jehovah had been openly confessed by king and people. Elijah naturally expected that the worship of the true God would now be owned as the national faith, and that Baal worship would disappear in the fire of religious enthusiasm kindled on Carmel. But there was one in Israel who was not so ready to accept defeat. Neither Jezebel nor her court-priests had been present at Carmel. When she heard from Ahab a detailed account of that great day, and of the slaughter of the priests of Baal, her wrath against Elijah burned with fierce hatred. Forthwith, as an indication that the victory was not yet his, she sent a message to the prophet threatening him with certain death if he did not immediately betake himself out of the kingdom. To get rid of him in this way would serve her purpose well, whereas to murder him would be a dangerous proceeding in the present temper of the people. Even with Jezebel such an attempt would have to assume the forms of law (1 Kings xxi. 8-10). The shock of disappointment to Elijah



was the more severe that it was unexpected. He had no divine command to stay; and if, notwithstanding the great victory on Carmel, Jezebel and her priests were still to rule, then all had been in vain. "When he saw that, he arose and went for his life," driven by the sense of defeat, the uselessness of the conflict he was waging, and the thought that God had mocked him with great hopes which were not to be fulfilled. Along with his servant (or disciple) he passed to Beersheba on the southern border of Judah. Leaving his attendant there, he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. There, resting under a solitary juniper (or broom) tree, he brooded over the defeat of his hopes until his despondency found vent in words, and he begged the Lord to take away his life. "It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers."<sup>a</sup> The words probably mean that he had lived long enough; his work was ended, and ended in defeat; and there was no reason in himself why God should grant him the blessing of long life—the blessing of the righteous.

Worn out with sorrow and hard travelling, he lay down and slept. But while he slept an angel came and touched him, and he awoke to find a cake ready baked and a cruse of water. In obedience to the angel he ate and drank, but still wearied, lay down again. A second time the angel awoke him, bidding him eat as a preparation for a long journey. Then refreshed in body, but still troubled in spirit, he journeyed "in the strength of that

<sup>a</sup> Numbers xi. 14-15; Jeremiah xx. 7-18.

meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb, the Mount of God." The journey to Horeb would, in ordinary circumstances, take only about ten days, so that Elijah could not have travelled directly thither. There is however no indication that he was directed by the angel to Horeb, or that he made straight for that place. All that is said is, that at the end of forty days he arrived there. The intervening time may have been spent in the desert, fighting with the mystery of his disappointment. These forty days were a period of preparation for the revelation at Sinai, as the forty years in Midian were for Moses, and the forty years in the Wilderness for the people of Israel.

22. **THE REVELATION AT HOREB** (1 Kings xix. 9-14). It is not without significance that Elijah, at the end of forty days, and still full of despondency, should arrive at the Mount of God. His mission was to restore in Israel the Law given in that very place through Moses. It is probable also that in this same region St Paul spent part of that time of retirement "in Arabia."<sup>a</sup> "Moses and Paul—the law-giver and the expounder of the true meaning and use of the Law—hold fellowship across a void of fifteen hundred years, the only intermediate link being Elijah, the awful reviver of the law."<sup>b</sup> His disappointment would at first be intensified by the sacred associations of the place. In the presence of the wild scenery about him, and with memories of the giving of the Law, he could less

<sup>a</sup> Conybeare and Howson's "Life and Epistles of St Paul." New ed., p. 80.

<sup>b</sup> "Desert of Sinai" (H. Bonar).

than ever understand why the fire from heaven and the clear manifestation of the power of God had not been the beginning of a change which would immediately sweep every trace of Baal worship from the land. Had Elijah felt that the nation had really turned to Jehovah, no threatening message of Jezebel would have driven him away in despair. The faith of the people had not taken fire even in the presence of such Divine power. Jezebel's message was but the proof of this. But now God taught him that there was no cause for disappointment, for there were other and better ways of bringing the people to the true faith. The scene was peculiarly fitted for the revelation which was now granted to the champion of the Law. "It is the only time since the days of Moses that history brings us back to those sacred solitudes."<sup>a</sup> The revelation may very possibly have been given in the secluded hollow which lies beneath the summit of what is still called the "Mount of Moses." "One tall cypress stands in the centre of the little upland plain. A ruined chapel covers the rock on which the prophet is believed to have rested on the slope of the hill. A well and tank ascribed to him are on the other side of the basin. The granite rocks enclose it on every side as if it were a natural sanctuary. No scene could be more suitable for the vision which follows."<sup>a</sup> Successively there passed before the prophet manifestations more terrible than he had yet known of God's great power. In rapid succession there swept over the place a storm of wind, an earthquake, and a

<sup>a</sup> Stanley's "Jewish Church."

fire. Before these forces of nature the prophet cowered in fear. They might seem to fit in with his own mood. Yet they brought not to him any consciousness of the Divine presence. God was not in them. Following these came "a sound of gentle stillness," and immediately Elijah came out of the cave,<sup>a</sup> drawing his rough mantle over his face, as seemed to be his custom, at the near approach to God. The wind, the earthquake, the fire, were fit instruments of Divine vengeance. But to His own people Jehovah was still what He proclaimed Himself to Moses in this place—"The Lord, the Lord, a God full of compassion, and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth" (Exod. xxxiv. 6, R.V.). If Elijah could only remember this he would not cry out in despair and complaint, but would return, knowing that God would be gracious to Israel, that He would not allow them utterly to apostatise, but would speak to them, and win them in other than tones of thunder. "He, the furthest removed of all the prophets from the evangelical spirit and character, has yet enshrined in the heart of his story the most forcible of protests against the hardness of Judaism, the noblest anticipation of the breadth and depth of Christianity" (Stanley).

23. COMMISSIONS IN THE DESERT (I Kings xix. 15-18). God having revealed Himself to Elijah in the sound of gentle stillness, bade him return, encouraged and comforted. He was told that the

<sup>a</sup> The use of the definite article seems to point to a well-known cave. Cheyne's surmise that "it may be that the cave in which he now lodged was the very 'cleft of the rock' where Moses is said to have been hid when Jehovah passed by" is interesting.

work of reformation was not yet complete, that three others—Hazeal, Jehu, and Elisha—must share in it. The commissions to “anoint” were not carried out by Elijah himself.<sup>a</sup> Indeed, the only one of the three of whom it is told that he was actually “anointed” is Jehu, and in his case it was by one of the “sons of the prophets.” The import of these commissions must, however, have been clear to Elijah. They were a witness to him that he was working out part of a Divine plan for the uprooting of Baal worship, and that being only one of several instruments in the hands of God, he must not complain if fulfilment of the Divine purpose was not in his time. Retribution would fall upon the deceivers of the nation and the worshippers of Baal; “him that escapeth from the sword of Hazeal shall Jehu slay, and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.” But the reforming vengeance was not to destroy the nation utterly. There would yet remain 7000 who bowed not the knee to Baal nor kissed his image. The reference is to the condition of Israel when Hazeal, Jehu, and Elisha should have completed their work. The number “seven” and its multiples are “the symbolical numeral sign of holiness—the covenant and ceremonial number.” There was still to remain a covenant people, the nucleus of a reformed faith.<sup>b</sup>

**24. THE CALL OF ELISHA** (1 Kings xix. 19). Of the three commissions to Elijah, one only was carried out by himself. But that one was the most important of all. Whether Elijah had any previous

<sup>a</sup> 2 Kings viii. 7-15, ix. 1-6.

<sup>b</sup> Isaiah i. 9; Ezek. vi. 8; Matthew xxiv. 22; Romans xi. 2-5.

knowledge of Elisha or not, the direction given was sufficiently clear to enable him to find his successor. Abel-meholah<sup>a</sup> was situated in a rich agricultural district in the country of Manasseh, on the west side of Jordan. In a field there Elijah found the man he sought. Elisha was engaged ploughing, thankful for the recent heavy rains, which gave promise of an abundant harvest. There were twelve yoke of oxen, each yoke ploughing a furrow. The last of the twelve men, following each his plough, was Elisha the son of Shaphat. Into the midst of this peaceful and busy scene came Israel's renowned prophet, and passing over to Elisha, cast his mantle upon him. Probably no word was spoken. The mantle was the sign of prophetic office and power,<sup>b</sup> and the symbolic act was at once apprehended by Elisha. For a moment he stood in amazement, not unmingled with awe, at the high calling thus suddenly come to him. When he fully came to himself Elijah had passed on, and was already leaving the field. The call was given, but to obey it must be the free act of Elisha himself.

25. **COUNTING ALL THINGS BUT LOSS** (1 Kings xix. 20-21). There was but a moment's hesitation with Elisha as he tried to take in the significance of this sudden call. Then recovering himself, he "left the oxen and ran after Elijah, and said, 'Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee.'" This request has often been compared to that of the young scribe, who said to Jesus, "Lord, suffer me first to bury my father." But to put the two on a level is

<sup>a</sup> Judges vii. 22 ; 1 Kings iv. 12.

<sup>b</sup> 2 Kings ii. 13-14.

to misunderstand both. The scribe desired to remain at home so long as his father lived, and only when death had broken the tie would he follow Christ. This was in effect to decline the invitation, for the request might cover a period of many years. Elisha's appeal covered an hour or two at most, and implied acceptance of the call. The request to bid farewell to his father and mother is proof of how heartily and definitely he accepted the commission; how ready he was, at the call of God, to break with the life of ease, and take up the hard work of a prophet to an unwilling people. The response of Elijah has seemed to some to convey a rebuke, as if he were "indignant at this re-awakening of desire for the world."<sup>a</sup> But this request meant the forsaking of the world, not the desire for it. The fact that Elisha did return indicates that the man who heard the words did not take them as a rebuke. They probably mean,—Go back, but remember what I have done to thee; thou art now a man under Divine call, and must act as such. Elisha immediately returned to the field, and made a farewell feast to the people. The feast, though not perhaps a sacrificial priestly act, had a distinctly religious aspect. It was the formal separation from his past life and devotion to the new sphere opening up before him. In killing the yoke of oxen with which he had been ploughing, and using the wood of the plough to make the fire,<sup>b</sup> he plainly indicated his final and voluntary separation from the quiet life in Abel-meholah, and the definite surrender of himself to the call and the will of God.

<sup>a</sup> Ewald, "History of Israel," iv. 81.

<sup>b</sup> 2 Samuel xxiv. 22.

## 26. NABOTH'S VINEYARD (1 Kings xxi. 1-7).

The main work of Elijah was now accomplished. He had fought the battle of the Lord, and gained a victory which had a larger effect on the religious future of the nation than appeared at the time. He had received a revelation at Horeb which did much to bring peace to his troubled spirit by "asserting eternal providence, and justifying the ways of God to men." He had anointed his successor to the prophetic office, and thus had the assurance that God's work would still go on.

In the renewed confidence which these experiences brought to him, he retired to wait God's call to work, if for him there was any further work to do. Following the principle which had guided him all through those past years, he did the work appointed for him, and then waited upon God for further commands, never presuming to take a single step except at "the word of the Lord." Ahab's power and glory had distinctly grown in the meantime. Twice had he defeated the king of Syria, and so rolled back the one danger from without which threatened his kingdom. Freed from this, he had set about enlarging and beautifying his palace at Jezreel. In the prosecution of these plans, there was a strip of land laid out as a vineyard which interfered with the completion of his scheme. It belonged to Naboth, a distinguished citizen of Jezreel. To him the king went, with an offer which was not wanting in liberality—either he would let him have another and better vineyard, or else he would pay a good price down. The reply of Naboth can be understood, only when we remember the condition on



which every Israelite held his land. The fundamental principle was that stated in Lev. xxv. 23: "The land shall not be sold absolutely (in perpetuity), for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me." The land was Jehovah's, and He had given it to His own people to dwell in. But they had no title to sell or alienate the gift. All that any owner of land could sell was the lease of it up to the year of Jubilee when it must revert to the original owner or his heirs. This provision, whether it was carried out in practice or not, forbade parting with the land unless under very exceptional circumstances. Therefore the refusal of Naboth was no foolish sentiment, but a sacred duty.<sup>a</sup> He was evidently one who had not been carried away by the prevailing Baal worship. Though dwelling in the royal city of Jezreel, he had been faithful to the covenant with Jehovah. This condition of land ownership was part of that covenant, and no king who cherished the honour of Jehovah would have pressed such a request as that of Ahab. But whatever the king might do, Naboth would neither be bribed nor frowned into an arrangement contrary to his sense of duty. "The Lord forbid it me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee." Ahab was no doubt sufficiently acquainted with the reasons for this reply to realise the uselessness of offering a larger sum. His plan for "a garden of herbs," that is, a flower or kitchen garden as distinct from a park or forest land, could

<sup>a</sup> "He must fall out either with his God or his King, and conscience carries him against policy" (Bishop Hall).

not be carried out so long as Naboth continued in the same mind. So Ahab came into his house heavy and displeased—"and he laid him down upon his bed and turned away his face and would eat no bread." This picture of the king "sulking" upon his bed like a spoilt child reveals in a vivid manner the weak point in Ahab's character. The personalities of the weak, conscience-cowed King and the strong, unscrupulous Queen are brought into contrast with dramatic effect.<sup>a</sup> He lets "I dare not" wait upon "I would"; she allows no obstacle to stand in the way of her own desire. Tyrannical and proud by nature, taught to regard her royal will as the only law, she scoffed at an idea of kingship in which the king owned authority to a supreme Power, and ruled according to the law of the Lord. Naboth's refusal seemed to her the stubborn and disloyal act of a fanatical worshipper of Jehovah. Once before (1 Kings xix. 1-2) she showed her contempt for the weakness of her husband in allowing Elijah to escape with his life, and now, if the king was still afraid to act, she at least had no scruples to overcome. If only Ahab would put the royal authority in her hand for a few hours she would give him the vineyard of Naboth. There is something of scorn in the way Jezebel put her husband aside, and sought a swift way to obtain possession of the coveted land. That the path was red with blood mattered nothing to this Old Testament "Lady Macbeth." The King was willing to have his desire satisfied at any cost, though not himself daring the deed. When he passed to her

<sup>a</sup> Compare "Macbeth," Act I. Scene vii.

his signet ring, he knew well it was to be used in no righteous way, but was glad to escape the necessity of asking any questions. Jezebel had too much scorn for his hesitancy to consult him. It was sufficient that his wish should be gratified.

27. JUDICIAL MURDER (1 Kings xxi. 8-17). Jezebel's manner of accomplishing her end is peculiarly abhorrent. "There is no mischief so devilish as that which is cloaked with Piety" (Hall). She ordered a letter, sealed with the royal authority, to be sent to the elders of the city, commanding them to proclaim a fast, and when the religious feelings of the people had been thus quickened, to call an Assembly, and set Naboth, as one of the chief men of the city, at the head of it. The fast was always the sign of penitence, and was fitted to rouse a measure of fanaticism which would well suit the Queen's purpose. It is strange however to find Jezebel ordering a religious fast for Jehovah. By placing Naboth at the head of the Assembly the shock to the religious sentiments of the people would be all the greater.<sup>a</sup> While Naboth was thus before the people's eyes in a religious Assembly, two false witnesses<sup>b</sup> — "sons of worthlessness" — were to come forward with the charge that the man who was making all this profession of religion had blasphemed God and the King. The penalty was death.<sup>c</sup> Jezebel left them no option as to that, "carry him out and stone him that he die."

<sup>a</sup> Compare Browning's "Count Gismond" (first half).

<sup>b</sup> Deut. xvii. 16.

<sup>c</sup> Exodus xxii. 28; Lev. xxiv. 14-16.

The terrible moral condition to which the policy of Jezebel and her Baal worship had reduced the people is evident from the readiness with which the elders and nobles lent themselves to her plot. Degenerate days had indeed fallen upon Israel, and the Queen must have known with whom she had to deal ere she took this barefaced course. It was done as she commanded, and not only Naboth, but his sons with him <sup>a</sup> (2 Kings ix. 26), perished in that terrible sweep of miscalled justice so characteristic of the East. The message to Jezebel was dramatically short—"Naboth is stoned and is dead." There being no heirs to claim the property, it passed forthwith to the king, and Jezebel, in the pride of her bloody deed, came before him with the message, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth," "for Naboth is not alive but dead." Ahab, himself afraid to do such a deed, was well content to reap the fruit of it. He asked no questions, but must have learned now, if not before, the infamous plot against Naboth's life, and certainly knew of it when he went down to take possession. He could not free himself from the moral responsibility for it. His desire, however, was now satisfied, and the pleasure of its accomplishment soothed any qualms of conscience he might have felt. He was ready to go down and carry out his scheme for a garden of herbs; for wickedness was triumphant, and God was silent in His Heaven.

28. THE AVENGER OF BLOOD (1 Kings xxi. 17-29). "The triumphing of the wicked is short,

<sup>a</sup> Joshua vii. 24.

and the joy of the godless is but for a moment." Ahab was already in the coveted vineyard. He saw his plan complete, when behold, at the entrance of the vineyard he came suddenly face to face with the one man in all the world whose presence would turn his dearly-bought satisfaction into bitterness. Elijah had retired to the solitude of the hills, possibly to Carmel the scene of Jehovah's great victory, when the word of the Lord once again summoned him to action. For six years he had lived in retirement, leaving Ahab undisturbed. Now he flashed upon the King with a more terrible message than ever he had spoken in the past. At the sight of the well-known figure, Ahab felt that he had been caught in his sin. "Hast thou found me (overtaken me), O mine enemy?" The words are no blustering defence of himself. They are the sudden cry of conscience. The answer of Elijah, "I have found thee," is like the announcement, "Be sure thy sin will find thee out." And not this sin only. The whole course of Ahab's life had been downward—"thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord"; and the penalty of all that evil past was now to come upon him with fearful force. "I will bring evil upon thee, and will utterly sweep thee away, and will cut off from Ahab every man child" (R.V.). An eloquent writer speaks of "the two streams of sin and sorrow" that sooner or later "shall rush together, to remain blended for ever."<sup>a</sup> This is the experience which was coming home to Ahab at that moment of the seeming triumph of iniquity, and as he

<sup>a</sup> Vinet.

became conscious of the fact, the pleasure of sin was gone, only the sorrow remained. But the prophet had also to pronounce sentence upon Jezebel, and this exceeded even that of Ahab. "The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the portion of Jezreel"<sup>a</sup>—*i.e.* "without the walls of Jezreel."

The terror of the punishment pronounced bore the king to the dust. His sin had found him out indeed, and was demanding its full reckoning. Like the shadow of a great cloud, that sentence hung over his daily life. The words of doom rung in his ears till "he put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went softly." This repentance on the part of Ahab was without doubt a sincere acknowledgment of regret for the sin which he would not himself commit, but which in a weak moment he allowed to be done in his name, and of which he was prepared to reap the benefit. The repentance was accepted so far that the full measure of the penalty was not exacted in Ahab's lifetime.

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## CHAPTER IV.

29. **DEATH OF AHAB** (1 Kings xxii. 1-40; 2 Chron. xviii. 28-34). The end of Ahab and the circumstances attending it are given as the fulfilment of the doom pronounced by Elijah. Ahab and Jehosaphat of Judah had joined their forces

<sup>a</sup> See marginal reading in R.V.

against the common enemy—the king of Syria. At Ramoth-gilead, one of the strongholds of Israel which Benhadad refused to give up according to agreement, the allied Hebrew army was met by the Syrian host. Early in the battle Ahab was wounded by a stray arrow, but, with the personal bravery which characterised him, he would not leave the field in case of discouraging his soldiers.

The last sight we have of the king who had so disastrously placed himself in opposition to Jehovah and His people is not without a certain nobility. It is a tragic figure which presents itself as we read the closing chapter of his lifelong, desperate struggle against righteousness. Ahab fought hard against his fate to the last, and, as he entered the battle of Ramoth-gilead he stripped off all signs of his rank. But the device was vain, for a stray arrow pierced between the joints of his armour. Not even then would the king yield. Retiring for a moment from the thick of the fight he returned to the battle, and, though feeling his life blood draining from him, he stood supported until the even in his war chariot. Only at sundown, when the stubborn fight was drawing to a close, did the exhausted king sink down upon the floor of his chariot dead. The army, left without an effective leader, failed to follow up the dearly bought advantage, and scattered as shepherdless sheep. The body of the dead king was brought back to Samaria and buried with due respect. The chariot stained with his life blood was taken to the pool of the city to be washed, and there the dogs, as they lapped up the blood-stained

water, brought to pass the awful words of Elijah, and were the instruments of avenging on Ahab the cruel fate to which Naboth had been doomed. The votaries of the heathen goddess, as they came in the evening for the customary bath, found the water in which they washed themselves to be still dyed with the blood of Israel's king.

30. THE SIN OF AHAZIAH (2 Kings i. 1-8). After the tragic meeting of Elijah and Ahab at the vineyard of Naboth we hear nothing more of Elijah for four years. Where or how that interval was spent we know not. It would seem that he had again retired to some secluded spot, possibly about Carmel, and thence issued forth to visit the schools of the prophets over which he exercised a great influence. During these years, considerable changes had taken place in Israel. Ahab had perished in battle, and his son Ahaziah was now on the throne of Israel. From the son of an Ahab and a Jezebel not much could be expected in the way of moral reformation. But Ahaziah seems to have possessed the faults and the weakness of his parents, without any of their strength of character. The influences of a court given over to Baal-worship produced a king weak in character and corrupt in religion. He had nothing of the personal bravery or statesmanship of his father, and had yielded wholly to the religious influence of his mother. His reign, however, was cut short by an accidental fall through the lattice of an upper chamber in his palace at Samaria. The injuries resulting were so serious that there were grave doubts as to his recovery. The king thereupon ordered messengers



to go to Ekron—the most northern of the five principal cities of Philistia, and therefore the nearest to Samaria, and there enquire of Baalzebub<sup>a</sup> the god of Ekron, whether he would recover or not. In such a message there was nothing wanting to add insult to the God of Israel. That, notwithstanding the experience and the severe lessons of the reign of Ahab, his son should still acknowledge Baal as god, was in itself enough to bring down judgment upon him. But that he should openly proclaim the non-existence of Jehovah as the God of Israel, by sending to a foreign city, as if there were no God over his own nation, was the last possible dishonour to the true God, and a crime which no king in Israel had ever yet dared. It is not surprising that such a deed brought forth once more the valiant defender of the true faith. The message of the Lord came to Elijah—“Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the King of Samaria.” In the stern words of the Tishbite we detect the deep sense of the nation’s humiliation, as well as his own indignation against the insult to Jehovah. The scathing enquiry, “is it because there is no God in Israel that ye go to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron?” is pointed with the death sentence of the king. The messengers do not seem to have recognised who this stern opposer in their path was, but they were so far awed by his presence that they felt compelled to return to Samaria and report. The man who

<sup>a</sup> He was the Fly-god—the god to whom appeal was made against plagues of flies. This is the only mention of this deity in the Old Testament. The reading in the New Testament (Matthew x. 25, etc.) should be “Beelzebub,” which probably means “dung-god,” a form of name used by the Jews to express contempt and loathing.

could tell whither they were going and what their mission was, was not a man whose word could be disregarded. The return of the messengers surprised the King, and the answer they brought roused his suspicions that this was the old enemy of his house. The messengers described him as "an hairy man and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins." The literal rendering is "lord (possessor) of hair," and the words may describe a superabundance of hair about the head and face, giving him a rugged appearance. The phrase, however, is generally supposed to refer to his dress,—the shaggy cloak or mantle of hair, which in other cases also was the attire of a prophet. The description given was sufficient to confirm the suspicion of Ahaziah, who had no hesitation in announcing, "It is Elijah the Tishbite." That stern personality had impressed itself too deeply upon the mind of the house of Ahab for any hesitation on the part of Ahab's son.

**31. FIRE FROM HEAVEN** (2 Kings i. 9-18). Ahaziah took up the conflict in which his father had so signally failed, and sent a captain with a company of fifty soldiers to capture and bring to Samaria the man who had dared to send such a message of death. The first captain sent, found Elijah sitting (or dwelling) on the top of the "hill," probably Carmel. The demand to surrender himself was peremptory, wanting in any evidence of respect for Elijah as a man of God. The answer was unexpectedly terrible—"if I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty." The captain of a second detach-

ment was still more peremptory, "come down quickly," and met with a similar fate to the first company. A third time a captain and his band of fifty appear at the foot of the hill, but this time their leader, terrified by the fate of his predecessors, approached Elijah with great reverence, and was rewarded by returning to Samaria with the man of God in his company. We have only the briefest account of the one meeting which took place between Elijah and Ahaziah. To the king's face the prophet repeated the stern rebuke and judgment which he had already sent by the messengers intercepted on the way to Ekron. Having done so he was evidently allowed to depart again unharmed. In the presence of Elijah every threat became as idle words.

**32. DIFFICULTIES OF THE NARRATIVE.** This last conflict between Elijah and the house of Ahab is of a character which seems difficult to reconcile with our ideas of a "man of God." The captains were obeying the command of their sovereign, and even if the tone of the former be thought faulty, there may have been no intended disrespect ; and the soldiers were not morally responsible for the words used by their leaders. At first sight Elijah appears "the merciless wielder of the power committed to him." The spirit of this deed as it showed itself in the disciples is plainly condemned by our Lord (Luke ix. 54-56). The same condemnation, however, does not necessarily extend to the action of Elijah ten centuries before the reign of "grace and truth," as to the disciples who failed to recognise the difference which the coming of

Christ had made. A deed which to-day would shock the enlightened Christian sense might have a different meaning in the times of a preparatory dispensation and ruder moral ideas. We may be assured, that the swift and terrible judgment upon the two companies of soldiers roused very different feelings in Israel from what a similar occurrence would awaken in our own time, and that the effect of it would be on the side of righteousness, by quickening the moral feelings of the people. In the fact that the fate of the soldiers was bound up with that of their leaders, we have an instance of that solemn law of corporate responsibility, which is seen at work in so many cases both in Scripture and in life.<sup>a</sup>

33. THE LAST JOURNEY (2 Kings ii. 1-8). Elijah seems to have had some divine intimation that his work on earth was done, and that the hour of his departure was at hand. It is probable that, at the time, he and Elisha were staying at Gilgal, where was a colony of the sons of the prophets (2 Kings iv. 38). Whether the revelation was made to both at the same time, or only to Elijah, who indicated to Elisha the separation about to take place, we are not told. The latter is the more probable. Various reasons have been suggested for Elijah's desire to be alone. Possibly his old love of solitude returned to him in this solemn hour. He himself may not have been clear as to how God would bring about the separation, but with the consciousness of impending change, desired to be alone. That desire would be changed into the opposite when he realised

<sup>a</sup> Genesis xix. 24-25. Joshua vi. 21-25; vii. 24. 1 Samuel xv. 3.

how deeply and devotedly Elisha loved him. Our most sacred and solemn hours we can share with few, and even with these only when for the moment we find that they are one with us in love and sympathy.<sup>a</sup> Thus Elijah's desire that Elisha should stay behind ceased after the thrice-repeated assurance of his disciple's whole-hearted love. That thrice-repeated assurance brought the two into perfect harmony (John xxi. 17).

The Gilgal here spoken of cannot be the same as that referred to in Joshua iv. 19; v. 9, 10. For that is on a lower level (some 3000 feet) than Bethel. There was, however, a Gilgal in the hill country of Ephraim, where travellers could be said to "go down from Gilgal to Bethel." It is probably from this Gilgal that the two journeyed to Bethel, where was another of the schools of the prophets. These were places for the preparation of men for the religious service of the country. They were the strongholds of the worship of Jehovah, and of a patriotism which objected to any other alliance than with the God of Israel. Elijah evidently made these farewell visits with the object of warning and encouraging those in

<sup>a</sup> Compare Archbishop Trench's sonnet, "The Heart's Sacredness" :—

"A wretched thing it were to have our heart  
Like a broad highway or a populous street,  
Where every idle thought has leave to meet,  
Pause, or pass on as in an open mart.

"But keep thou thine a holy solitude,  
For He who would walk there would walk alone;  
He who would drink there must be first endued  
With single right to call that stream His own."

the schools for the days when he would no longer be among them to fight the Lord's battle. Whatever admonitions he addressed to them were made more solemn by the announcement that this was the last time they should see his face. That naturally was the fact which impressed them most deeply, and full of the news they gathered round Elisha, who was standing apart, his own heart too full of the coming separation to allow him to mix with the others. Their regret was at losing the great prophet, under whose shadow they had lived. Elisha's grief was that of a son parting from his father, and he expressed the impatience of a sorrow in which they could have no share, when he said to them, "Yea, I do know; hold ye your peace." They spoke of a "Master." He was thinking of a "Father." The same scene was enacted at Jericho, which was their next halting place. Although this town had only been rebuilt in the time of Ahab, it had evidently quickly grown into importance, and become a centre for the prophetic order (ii. 5). As the two departed from Jericho, fifty of the sons of the prophets stood on the rising ground on the right bank of the Jordan, watching with eager interest what might happen. They saw them reach the waters of the river, where for a moment they stood. Then Elijah, taking his mantle and rolling it up, smote the waters, which divided at the stroke, so that the two passed over on dry ground (Exodus xiv. 16).

34. **ELISHA'S REQUEST** (2 Kings ii. 9-11). Elijah, knowing that he was parting from his faithful servant, was anxious to leave with him some proof of his trust and affection, and asked him to

choose what his parting gift should be. One thought was evidently lying heavy upon the mind of Elisha—that it would fall to him to take up the work of his master. He was deeply conscious of his inability for that work, and the request made indicated how earnestly he desired to fulfil the task which was now about to become his. The request was beyond the province of Elijah to grant. The Giver of the Spirit is God only. But if God were to grant the petition, a token of the endowment of the Spirit should be that Elisha would see his master in the moment of separation. The request of Elisha probably refers to the double portion which, according to the Law (Deut. xxi. 17), fell to the eldest son, and means that Elisha craved such a blessing as a father might give to a first-born son. It would at the same time be evidence that Elijah regarded him as a father regards his eldest son and heir. It certainly cannot mean that he should have twice as much of the Spirit as his master possessed, for such a desire would not be in accordance with Elisha's reverence for Elijah.

### 35. ENTERING INTO REST (2 Kings ii. 11, 12).

It is probable that during the earlier part of the journey little had passed between the two. But now that they had left all behind them, and were alone on the east side of Jordan, and once again among the hills of Gilead, the love of master and disciple, which had been growing clearer to each as the journey proceeded, knit them in the fellowship in which heart is open to heart. As they went on their way "they talked"; and suddenly, in the midst of this holy converse, there appeared "a chariot of fire

and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder." The might of the Lord came between them in a form which is pictured by "a chariot of fire and horses of fire."<sup>a</sup>

Then, "by a whirlwind," Elijah passed up into heaven, and Elisha, as he realised that the moment of separation had come, cried in his distress, "My father, my father; the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof." Not only had he lost one who was to him a father, but Israel had lost her chief strength; the man best fitted to guide the people into that righteousness which exalteth a nation, and to preserve them from the dangers of Baal-worship.

The translation of Elijah has been often compared to the Ascension of Christ, and taken to be a type of that event. The comparison is scarcely warranted. Christ had passed through death, and His body had been buried. The risen Christ was much more of heaven than of earth, and His Ascension was the natural outcome of His Resurrection. Christ ascended as the representative of man and to continue His work for man. Elijah's work was done. The comparisons with Enoch and Moses are more to the point. In the case of Enoch, the phrase, "he was not, for God took him," is too brief to offer many points of comparison, though the Jewish mind must have had its own way of representing this, and that possibly a way which would make the translation of Elijah not improbable to them. It appears too that they filled in the story of the departure of Moses with some detail, and placed all three scenes in the same category.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> 2 Kings vi. 17; Psalm civ. 3, 4.

<sup>b</sup> Origen. Josephus.



36. THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT (2 Kings ii. 13-18). In the first moment of parting, Elisha had but one thought, his own and Israel's loss, and in token of his grief he rent his clothes in two pieces. But the fact that he had seen the translation of Elijah was evidence that his request was granted. In discussing the form in which the departure of Elijah took place, we must remember that what is described here by a natural symbol was a spiritual vision. Had the fifty sons of the prophets been at hand they would have seen nothing. The vision which Elisha saw was the result of the gift of a larger measure of the spirit than he had previously possessed. An increased measure of the spirit implies an increased power of spiritual vision. It is both needless and beside the great lesson of the narrative, to ask whether this was some natural phenomenon, such as a storm cloud. The tenor of the passage indicates that this was a spiritual manifestation, which is described to us under material symbols.

When the vision had passed, and Elisha stood alone upon the plain, there at his feet lay the mantle of his master. That mantle had been a token throughout Israel of the great work of Elijah, the prophet of Jehovah. It had once before been cast over the shoulders of Elisha as a sign that he was called to this office. Now when it fell from off Elijah, whose work on earth was done, Elisha took it up as the symbol of the prophetic office which he himself had now to discharge in Israel.

Returning to the bank of the Jordan, he followed the example of his master, and smote the waters

with the mantle of Elijah, crying out for the God who had been with Elijah to manifest Himself now, and so passed over on dry ground. Elijah was gone, but God remained. The power lay not in the mantle nor in the man who handled it, but in God who abideth ever. The fifty sons of the prophets, still watching from the heights behind Jericho, recognised that the spirit that had been on Elijah had now come upon Elisha, and did him reverence accordingly.

They had seen the two pass over Jordan—Elisha alone returned. They knew that God had taken Elijah to Himself, but it was possible that his body might be cast upon some mountain or into some valley. If so, they would seek for it, and give it honoured burial. The knowledge which they possessed, and which they were so eager to convey to Elisha, makes it most improbable that they expected to find Elijah alive.

Elisha, knowing that his master was gone up to God, refused to give them leave to go on what must be a fruitless errand. We have no indication that he revealed at that time all that he had seen, though he must have done so at a later date. Wearied with the persistency of their request, he at length gave his consent, and when at the end of three days the fifty men returned unsuccessful, he simply reminded them of the folly of not accepting his word.

37. THE WRITING OF ELIJAH (2 Chronicles xxi. 12-15). There is an account of a "writing" which came to Jehoram, King of Judah, which is of interest. It is not easy, however, to fit it into any

part of Elijah's life. The difficulty is mainly chronological. Although Elijah's ministry was exercised in the Northern Kingdom, he recognised Jehovah as God over the twelve tribes (1 Kings xviii. 31), and there is nothing improbable in his interest in the Kingdom of Judah. The book of Chronicles deals mainly with the Southern Kingdom, and would therefore take no notice of Elijah's work, except in so far as it affected that kingdom. But as to the chronological difficulty, it is hardly possible to arrive at any definite conclusion; for the chronological statements as to the reign of Jehoram, King of Judah, are peculiarly conflicting.<sup>a</sup>

Now Elisha's public ministry began (and Elijah's translation most likely preceded this) early in the reign of Jehoram, King of Israel (2 Kings iii. 11), and several years before the death of Jehosaphat, the father of the Jehoram to whom the writing was sent. These explanations of the difficulty have been given (1) that Elijah, in the exercise of his prophetic office and foreseeing the sins of Jehoram, king of Judah, left this writing that it might be handed to him for whom it was intended, when the fitting moment came; (2) that Jehoram, the son of Jehosaphat, began to reign before the death of his father (2 Kings viii. 16; see R.V. and margin). This is unlikely; and it is still more improbable that during his father's lifetime his power was so absolute that he slew all his brothers, for whom, and in order to preserve brotherly peace, their father had made ample provision; (3) that the account of Elijah's translation is given out of

<sup>a</sup> 1 Kings xxii. 42; 2 Kings i. 17; iii. 1; viii. 16.

chronological order, that he lived in retirement years after Elisha's ministry began, and only came forth from that privacy for the last great scene. But the account given in 2 Kings ii. 1-15 is of itself sufficient to dispose of such an explanation. Elijah is there not a man come forth from inactivity, but the recognised leader and instructor of the sons of the prophets. Elisha is still his "servant," who waits for his master's word. In the very full account of that last scene there is nothing to show that Elijah recognised in Elisha "a prophet of Israel raised above himself" (Milligan's "Elijah," p. 179), but there is clear evidence that Elisha was not yet recognised as more than the honoured servant of the man of God (2 Kings ii. 3 and 15); (4) that the writing was sent, in the name of Elijah, from some one of the sons of the prophets, who had learned the spirit of the great master and conceived himself a soldier in the conflict which Elijah had so daringly waged.

**38. THE IMPRESSION MADE BY ELIJAH ON LATER AGES; AS ILLUSTRATED IN SCRIPTURE.** The imagination of Israel was profoundly impressed by the great personality of Elijah. The stern, unbending loyalty to the cause of Jehovah, the fearlessness with which he fought the battle for his God, the strength of conviction which lay behind all his words, his sudden and dramatic appearances and his mysterious disappearances, and finally the circumstance of his departure from earth, were all fitted to give him a singular and a permanent place in the national memory. He

had saved Israel in a crisis of her history, and centuries afterwards the faith and hope of the people looked to his reappearance (Malachi iv. 5-6). In the time of our Lord, the figure of Elijah still held the imagination of both priests and people. The stern Baptist and the gentle Jesus were both proclaimed to be the long expected Elijah at length revisiting Israel (Matthew xvi. 14; John i. 21). Christ gave them to see in John the Baptist, His own forerunner, the Elijah whom prophecy announced as coming to prepare the way of the Lord (Matthew xi. 14). Again, in the glorious scene on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Law and the prophets were represented by the two grandest figures of the Old Testament, the giver and the defender of the Law, Moses and Elijah (Luke ix. 30). "The Law was given by Moses," and in Elijah it found its most outstanding champion. "Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ"; and at that holy moment, as the "two men" talked with the Christ, the harmony of their work and the common purpose of their ministries were declared. Such was the people's faith in Elijah as "the living one," that when the cry of Christ on the Cross fell on their ears, they immediately concluded that the help of Elijah was sought in that hour of need (Matthew xxvii. 47).

The word of God at Horeb came back to St Paul as an encouragement to his faith, that though his Jewish kinsfolk had treated the Messiah worse than their fathers had done by Elijah and the prophets, there should yet be left "a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans xi.

2-5). Finally St James points us to Elijah as a conspicuous instance of the "effectual, fervent prayer" of the righteous, and a witness to the power of believing supplication in men of like passions with ourselves.

39. THE IMPRESSION MADE BY ELIJAH ON LATER AGES; AS ILLUSTRATED OUTSIDE SCRIPTURE.<sup>a</sup> In Jewish tradition, as is evident from the references in the Old and New Testaments, Elijah held a large place. He was always looked upon as still living and as having a more immediate association with earthly affairs than any other of the prophets. Good Rabbis were supposed to have often seen him appearing to them in their seasons of devotion, and during certain prayers, referring to the coming glory of Israel, the door of the house was left open that Elijah might enter and announce the Messiah.

The Roman Catholic Church has placed him in the number of her Saints, and many convents in the East have borne his name. On Mount Carmel was the most noted of these convents, and the once powerful order of Carmelites claimed Elijah as their Patron Saint.

The Greek or Eastern Church has also canonised Elijah, and made him, not inappropriately, the patron of hill tops. Many mountain peaks in Greece still bear his name.

Mahommedan tradition also lays claim to the strongest of the Old Testament prophets, holding that in virtue of his having drunk of the "Fountain

<sup>a</sup> "Elijah" in Smith's Dictionary of the Bible.

of Life," he still lives and will continue to live till the Day of Judgment.

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## CHAPTER V.

### ELISHA.

40. NATURE OF THE NARRATIVE. The call of Elisha, already narrated, must have taken place about four years before the death of Ahab, and the translation of Elijah could not have occurred till at least two years after Ahab's death. During these six or more years we have no record of where or how Elisha lived. There are reasons for believing that he spent the time with Elijah as his pupil and servant (2 Kings iii. 11), preparing for the work which would fall to him, and taking part in organising the guilds of the prophets. This would appear to have been the chief work of his master during those years, and afterwards of Elisha himself.

Although we have a more than usually detailed account of the mighty works of Elisha, we are told very little about the man himself. The chronology of his life is exceedingly indefinite, and many of the incidents are reported without regard to the order in which they took place. What we have is not so much a biography as a series of miracles with few links of narrative. By piecing together the scattered notices which are given in the record of these wonderful incidents, we gain a conception of Elisha

totally different from that of the prophet of Judgment who preceded him, and whose personality stands out so vividly in every scene.

41. **CONTRAST WITH ELIJAH.** In many things the difference between Elijah and Elisha is striking. Elijah had been reared among the wilds of Gilead, and in person and character had something of the ruggedness of his own mountains. He loved the solitude of the hills, and shunned the life of the city. His appearance was the signal of Divine judgment; his words were followed by terrible manifestations of Divine power and vengeance. Elisha, on the other hand, had been brought up in the quiet, agricultural district of Abel-Meholah. His dress was the ordinary garment of the East. He was the very opposite of "the hairy man" whose shaggy appearance was so well known and so feared by the King of Israel. He had a house of his own in Samaria (2 Kings v. 9), and was accessible to Kings (iii. 12), to the Elders of the city (vi. 32), to the Shunammite woman (viii. 1), to the foreigner from Damascus (v. 15). While faithful to the work and ministry of Jehovah, and stern in his rebuke (iii. 14), he was yet ready to help the King against his foes (vi. 12), and to meet the difficulties of Naaman in a way which would have been strange to the unbending Elijah. He could be stern and unrelenting in his dealings with a nation which rebelled against the rule of Israel (iii. 19), but he could also shew extraordinary kindness to the foes of his country (vi. 22). Most of his miracles were in aid of the poor and the distressed — domestic works rather than public.



Elijah was always in antagonism with the court. Elisha's attitude was different. More than once he appeared in the capacity of helper.

42. **CONTRAST—CONTINUED.** This difference is too remarkable to escape notice. It is difficult, however, to give any complete explanation of it. It could not arise from any want of faithfulness on the part of Elisha, for of this there is not the slightest hint. He was bold in his stand for truth, and sharp in his reprimand even of kings when occasion demanded. No doubt Jehoram differed from his predecessors in that he made some attempt at reformation. He put away the image of Baal which his father had made and set up (iii. 2), and was ready even to consult the prophet and accept his counsel in the troublous times of the Syrian war. Much of the difference also was no doubt due to the personal characteristic of each prophet, and the work which each had to do. The one was a son of the mountains, a man of strong feeling, full of sympathy and love for those with whom his regard for the truth of Jehovah did not bring him into conflict, but to the enemies of the Lord, stern, threatening, terrible. He was a man of "like passion" with ourselves, and had we the whole story of his life we should understand more clearly how he came to be remembered as the saviour of his nation, and why he was taken by Malachi as the type of Him who was to "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (iv. 6). Elisha moved no less steadily in the path of a divine ministry, but he moved with less impetuosity. Elijah,

standing against the power of a corrupt and resolute Court, had checked the advance of an alien and idolatrous faith, and Elisha's part was to "continue and carry out with more force than any other man of his time the work which Elijah had begun with new and wonderful power."<sup>a</sup> He was not called upon to inaugurate the opposition to Baal-worship, but to conserve the fruits of the victory which Elijah had already gained "and which the course of history itself now matured in spite of all resistance." Elijah was the soldier whose work it was to win battles, to break down resistance, and to scatter his foes. Elisha was the man to rule the province thus gained, to maintain the ground won by his predecessor, and to bring the influence of the new rule to bear upon all parts. In this honoured work, so different from that of Elijah, he lived "in the exercise of a constantly increasing influence"<sup>a</sup> for the long period of fifty years.

43. **HEALING THE WATERS** (2 Kings ii. 19-22). After the translation of Elijah, Elisha must have remained some days at Jericho, and the rumour circulated through the town that the same Spirit of Power which Elijah possessed was now with Elisha. The chief men of the city wisely considered that the presence of the prophet among them was an opportunity not to be missed. Accordingly, they came to him with the request that he would remove the one drawback to the prosperity of the city. The situation was pleasant, but the water which issued from the desolate, calcareous mountains behind the city, was of such a nature as to cause the trees to

<sup>a</sup> Ewald, "History of Israel," iv. 82.

shed their fruit prematurely, and the cattle which fed on the herbage to cast their young untimely.

Calling for a new cruse and a supply of salt, Elisha led the way to the spring whence the waters issued, and casting in the salt as the symbol of purification and preservation, declared that God had "healed" the waters. A spring called "Ain es Sultan" is still pointed out as the one in question, and as it is the only spring of any importance in the neighbourhood of Jericho, the tradition may in this case be accepted.

44. THE JUDGMENT OF IRREVERENCE (2 Kings ii. 23-25). From Jericho Elisha passed on to Bethel on his way north. Bethel was full of sacred associations and memories of the past, and contained at this time one of the schools of the prophets. It was, however, more notable then as the centre of the Calf-worship which Jeroboam had set up. The evils of idolatry, and the low type of priests who had flocked to the place at the invitation of Jeroboam, had corrupted the town and brought all religion into contempt.

As Elisha drew near, a band of youths<sup>a</sup> were hanging about the outskirts of the town. Whether they came forth with intent to mock, or by chance, is not explained. But recognising in him a prophet

<sup>a</sup> The Hebrew phrase need not mean children of tender years. The use of it by Solomon (1 Kings iii. 7), and by Jeremiah (i. 6, 7), applies more to inexperience than to years. But the presence of such a large number, and the judgment pronounced justify the inference that many at least were beyond the stage of what we would call "little children."

Compare Genesis xiv. 24 ; xxii. 5 ; Ex. xxxiii. 11 ; 1 Sam. xvi. 11, where the same word as here translated "child" is used.

of Jehovah, they turned upon him with scoffing. The mocking was not a passing sneer, but a persistent following of the prophet with derisive shouts, "Go up, thou bald head." The phrase "go up" can hardly refer to the ascension of Elijah, for that was probably unknown in Bethel at that time, and would have little or no point as applied to Elisha. The personal affront lay in the contemptuous "bald head." There are two words used for "baldness": one applying to baldness in the front part of the head, the other to baldness in the back part. It is the latter that was applied to Elisha, and it may perhaps be more correctly translated "round head," in reference to the short back hair of the prophet. Behind this contemptuous phrase there lay more than a reference to Elisha's personal appearance. Baldness was very rare in the East, and was looked upon with suspicion. Among the Hebrews it was an indication of leprosy (Lev. xiii. 43), and was regarded as a mark of Divine wrath and dishonour (Isaiah xv. 2). Further, all who were consecrated to the service of Jehovah were forbidden to shave the hair of their head (Lev. xxi. 5; Numb. vi. 5). The phrase was therefore full of all manner of insults, both to Elisha himself and to his prophetic office. It was not possible for Elisha to overlook such an offence against the prophet of the Lord, in this centre of Baal-worship. "He turned back and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord." That was Elisha's reply to the jeering crowd. But the narrative tells us that that curse had a terrible fulfilment in the destruction of forty-two of the mockers by two she-bears out of

the neighbouring woods. The judgment of God fell upon them. Of the prevalence of wild beasts in this neighbourhood we have an instance in the story of the disobedient prophet, who was torn by a lion after leaving the city (1 Kings xiii. 24). This tragic event has given rise to considerable difficulty in view of the contrast it presents to all else in Elisha's ministry, and especially in respect of the awful penalty which fell upon these young scoffers. We must remember, however, that the sin of these mockers was of a very heinous kind; that they were not irresponsible children; and that to allow the insult to pass with impunity might have had serious consequences for the future of Elisha's ministry in Israel. It is also well to bear in mind that the narrative before us is exceedingly brief, and wanting in details which might relieve the difficulty and modify the apparent disproportion between the wrong done and the penalty inflicted.

45. **THE REVOLT OF MOAB** (2 Kings iii. 1-5). The chronology at the beginning of this chapter is very difficult to reconcile with the dates given in other portions. Here Jehoram of Israel is said to have begun his reign in the eighteenth year of the reign of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah. In 2 Kings i. 17 he is said to have ascended the throne in the second year of Jehoram of Judah, the son of Jehoshaphat. In 2 Kings viii. 16 he is said to have been reigning five years before Jehoram of Judah succeeded his father, Jehoshaphat. It is possible to come near a reconciliation of these statements by supposing, on the strength of 2 Kings viii. 16, that Jehoram of Judah was co-ruler with his father for

about eight years. But the supposition is unlikely ; and even if it were accepted, the various dates would not harmonise. The incident, however, which is here recorded is consistent with what we learn by other testimony of the restlessness of Moab, at the time under the domination of Israel. Moab had been subject since the days of David. In the division of the kingdom it had fallen to Israel, while Edom went to Judah. Mesha was King of Moab, and paid a heavy tribute to Israel. Whether that tribute included the sheep as well as the wool is not clear ; but probably it was the wool only that was rendered.<sup>a</sup> There is a striking confirmation of what is said in 2 Kings iii. 5, in what is known as the Moabite Stone. This is a stone slab about 4 feet high and 2 feet broad, with an inscription, telling how Mesha had successfully rebelled against Israel. The rebellion had begun in the days of Omri. It had been suppressed by Ahab, but had broken out again in the days of his weaker sons. Part of the inscription runs : "I, Mesha, son of Chemosh-Melech, King of Moab, the Dibonite. . . . Omri was King of Israel, and he oppressed Moab many days, for Chemosh was angry with his land. His son also followed him, and he also said, I shall oppress Moab." The inscription then goes on to speak of the towns which Mesha captured from Israel, and the power of Chemosh, his god, against Jehovah, the God of Israel.

#### 46. THE INVASION OF MOAB BY THE ALLIED ARMIES (2 Kings iii. 6-15). Jehoram

<sup>a</sup> The literal rendering is "an hundred thousand lambs and an hundred thousand rams the wool."

determined to make a strong effort to suppress Moab, and not only mustered a large army in Israel, but sought the help of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah. The answer of Jehoshaphat was as cordial as the reply he had once before given to a similar request by Ahab (1 Kings xxii. 4).

On Jehoshaphat's advice the allied army marched through Edom, then tributary to Judah, in order to attack Moab from the south, the more defenceless border of the land. But prudent as this course might seem to be,<sup>a</sup> it came near to disaster. The Moabites naturally avoided coming to close quarters with so great an army, and for seven days the allied forces were in the desert without finding any fresh supplies of water. In this plight Jehoshaphat suggested consulting a prophet of Jehovah.

On inquiry the kings were informed that Elisha, the son of Shaphat, was there, which "poured water on the hands of Elijah." He was evidently best known then as the attendant of Elijah, but his name was already favourably known to Jehoshaphat, an evidence of the religious unity of the twelve tribes. The three kings accordingly went together to the prophet, but with Jehoram Elisha would have no dealings. He bade the King of Israel go to the false prophets of his father and the Baal-prophets of his mother. Jehoram had made some slight reformation (iii. 2), but he had not put away the worship of the golden calves. Yet for Jehoshaphat's sake Elisha was ready to appeal to God on behalf

<sup>a</sup> It strengthened the numbers of the invading army, and avoided the danger of Edom being left behind to make an effort for freedom on her own account

of the allied army. Disturbed, however, by the presence of Jehoram, he felt in no right attitude to commune with God, and commanded that a minstrel be brought to play before him. We have examples of the use of music by companies of prophets in 1 Samuel x. 5, and of the power of music over the mind in 1 Samuel xvi. 23. Neither of these instances, however, is on a parallel with this, and the relation of the prophetic genius to music is but obscurely indicated in Scripture. In 1 Chron. xxv. 1, "certain sons of Asaph and of Heman and of Jeduthun" are said to have been set apart, "who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals." These and other instances give evidence that "the same Hebrew term is used to denote the inspiration under which the prophets spoke, and that under which the minstrels sang,"<sup>a</sup> and suggest the close relationship between the two in the Hebrew mind.

47. **DELIVERANCE OF THE ARMY** (2 Kings iii. 16-27). When the minstrel played "the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha," and he advised the kings to order trenches to be dug throughout the valley, encouraging them with the assurance that, although they would see neither wind nor rain, abundant supplies of water would be there by morning. And further, he promised them a great victory over Moab, and prophesied the utter desolation of the land, as the victors swept everything before them.<sup>b</sup> In the early morning, just after dawn, water came

<sup>a</sup> Article, "Music," in Smith's Dictionary of the Bible.

<sup>b</sup> The command in Deut. xx. 19 applies only to the land of Canaan, which was to be their own habitation, and where, if a ruthless destruction of fruit trees took place in siege operations, the Israelites themselves would be the ultimate sufferers.



rushing down the valley "by the way of Edom," and abundant supplies for man and beast soon lay in the trenches. This abundance was due probably to heavy rains in the uplands of Edom, which poured down into the lower valleys, and collected in the trenches. Coming there as it did "by way of Edom," it would not be observed in its course by the Moabites on the high grounds to the South. When, therefore, the Moabite host saw the rays of the morning sun playing upon the waters gathered in the trenches of red<sup>a</sup> soil newly dug, and knew that none had lain there the evening before, they could account for the sight only by supposing that the unnatural alliance between traditional enemies and an unwilling tributary had resulted in mutual slaughter. Accordingly they bore down upon the allied army in broken, careless order, eager only for plunder, but were set upon and utterly defeated by the now refreshed troops. The King of Moab was driven into his last defenced city, where, as a final appeal to Chemosh his god, he sacrificed his eldest son upon the wall, in sight of the besieging host. The effect of these terrible scenes is described in terms, the point of which is not clear—"and there was great indignation against<sup>b</sup> Israel." Perhaps all were glad to retire from a land rendered impure and accursed by this awful deed of despair,<sup>c</sup> or it may be that the act to which their king was driven roused the Moabites to such desperate wrath against Israel, that it was thought prudent for the besiegers to retire. The word for "indignation" almost invariably implies

<sup>a</sup> Edom=red.

<sup>b</sup> R.V., "upon Israel."

<sup>c</sup> Psalm cvi. 36-38.

Divine wrath, and such a phrase in the mouth of a prophet of Israel, if used of Deity, would apply to Jehovah, and not Chemosh. If this be the meaning, the inference would be that Israel had been guilty of excess of cruelty in pressing the King of Moab to such desperate measures.

48. **THE INCREASE OF THE WIDOW'S OIL** (2 Kings iv. 1-7). From the awful scenes of blood and carnage we pass to a humble home in Israel. The widow of one of the sons of the prophets was in sore straits.<sup>a</sup> On her husband's death she found herself unable to meet the demands of a creditor who pressed her to the utmost length of the law and claimed the right of holding her sons as bondmen.<sup>b</sup> In her difficulty she appealed to Elisha as the recognised head of the prophetic guild. On Elisha's enquiry she acknowledged that she had nothing left but a small quantity of a coarse kind of oil which was used for anointing the body after a bath. That was enough in the prophet's hands to test and evidence faith. She was commanded to borrow from her neighbours all the vessels she could, to retire into the privacy of her house for an act of faith, and there pour out from the pot of oil into the borrowed vessels. As she did so the oil multiplied until she had filled every vessel she could lay hands on. Determined to do nothing without the direct command of Elisha, she came to him with the glad tidings of what had happened,

<sup>a</sup> Josephus gives the tradition that her husband was Obadiah, Ahab's Chamberlain, and that the poverty was due to relief granted to persecuted prophets, but there is little probability in this.

<sup>b</sup> Lev. xxv. 39-40; compare Matthew xviii. 25.

and was now told to sell the oil, pay her debt, and herself and her sons to live off the balance.

49. **THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN** (2 Kings iv. 8-17). Elisha's work as the recognised leader of the guild of prophets led him to travel largely, and his journeys often brought him to Shunem. He passed it on his way to Carmel, which had now become a centre of the worship of Jehovah. Shunem was the place of encampment of the Philistines before the battle of Gilboa (1 Samuel xxviii. 4), and is identified with the modern Solam, a few miles north of Jezreel. In this place lived a woman of wealth and influence, who extended a ready hospitality to the prophet every time he passed that way. These journeys must have been pretty frequent, for the woman, recognising the holy character of the prophet, suggested to her husband that they should build a special room, on the roof of the house, to which Elisha could gain access by an outside stair, thus securing for him quiet and privacy. The room was furnished very simply with a bed, a table, a divan or couch (along the wall), and a lamp. Here the prophet could come and go at his own pleasure, always sure of a peaceful resting-place and hearty hospitality. But Elisha was not content that such kindness should pass unacknowledged. Accordingly on one of his visits he bade Gehazi his servant interview the Shunammite. The narrative would seem to imply that the woman came into the prophet's presence, but that he addressed her through his servant. "So downtrodden," says Dean Farrar, in explanation of this, "was the position of woman in the East,

that any dignified person, much more a great prophet, could not converse with a woman without compromising his dignity." But to read the story in this way is to suppose an attitude on the prophet's part towards a true and godly woman which is unknown in the Old Testament, and appears only in later times in the life of Scribes and Pharisees, besides being inconsistent with Elisha's conversation with the woman a few minutes later. It further assumes that she retired from his presence on her first reply, while Elisha and Gehazi consulted what further recognition they could offer her. The story is better understood if we suppose that, when Elisha sent Gehazi to call the woman, she answered by coming and standing before him (Gehazi). The message entrusted to Gehazi was then delivered: "Behold thou hast been careful for us with all this care, what is to be done for thee? wouldst thou be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host?" Her reply was simply this: "I dwell among mine own people." Gehazi then returned and told this to Elisha, and he said, "What, then, is to be done for her?"

The first offer of help made by the prophet was not needed. She had no cause to plead before the King. She was safe and contented among her own people. There was, however, one thing which had attracted the attention of Gehazi. She was childless. If Elisha could promise her a gift from God, then a son to heir the wealth and to preserve the family among the tribes of Israel would fill up the measure of her joy. Accordingly the woman was summoned, now into Elisha's presence, and there the promise of a son was made.

50. THE SHUNAMMITE'S SON (2 Kings iv. 8-37). Several years had passed over the happy home in Shunem, when a sudden calamity plunged it into deepest sorrow. The boy, God's wonderful gift, went out one morning to the field where his father was superintending the reapers. Shortly afterwards he complained of headache, and his father, not knowing the seriousness of the trouble (probably sunstroke), ordered the lad in attendance to carry the boy back to his mother. But notwithstanding all a mother's love and care, the boy died at noon. Sudden and terrible as the blow was, the mother restrained the grief which was breaking her heart, and, carrying the body to the upper room, laid it on the prophet's bed. There, as if under the protection of the prophet's presence, it was safe from intruders. She evidently told no one, not even her husband, what had happened. Having shut the door of the chamber, she sought out her husband, and requested that he would send one of the servant men to saddle her ass, and attend upon her to Carmel, where Elisha then was. Her husband was surprised at the request, for though she had often before attended religious services at Carmel, where Elisha evidently presided and offered sacrifice, this was not one of those special days. She succeeded in evading her husband's question with the single word, "peace" ("all is well").<sup>a</sup> Bidding her servant urge on the ass at a quicker pace than was usual for a lady, she hastened to Carmel, a journey of about four hours. Elisha, from his place on the

<sup>a</sup> The word implying here and in verse 26, "never mind ; don't ask questions."

high ground, recognised her approaching, and surmising that something must be wrong in the home at Shunem, despatched Gehazi to meet her with anxious enquiry. But the woman dismissed Gehazi's enquiry with the same short word as she had spoken to her husband, and pressed up the hill to where Elisha was. Too full of grief to find words, she flung herself at the feet <sup>a</sup> of the man of God. Gehazi, resenting such freedom with his master, and perhaps smarting at her treatment of himself, attempted to thrust her away. Elisha interfered, perceiving that she was carried away by some great sorrow of which, as yet, he was ignorant. The reproachful words of the woman, "Did I desire a son of my lord? did I not say, Do not deceive me?" were sufficient to indicate that her joy had been turned into sorrow. Elisha, in his anxiety to bring immediate help, bade Gehazi prepare for a hurried journey, and without waiting to offer courtesies by the way, <sup>b</sup> to lay the prophet's staff upon the face of the child. <sup>c</sup> The broken-hearted mother, however, had less faith in Gehazi and the staff than in the presence of the man of God himself. Probably Elisha had not intended to follow up Gehazi, but the importunity of the woman would be satisfied with nothing less than that the "holy man of God" should himself come. It was well that he did so,

<sup>a</sup> Compare Luke viii. 41 ; John xi. 32.

<sup>b</sup> Salutations in the East occupy considerable time, and cannot be done in the passing. They would also be a temptation to further conversation.

<sup>c</sup> Compare Acts xix. 12. These cases, however, followed the giving of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles in the large measure promised by Christ. They were also instances of the removal of sickness, not the restoration of life.

for Gehazi's errand was in vain. The reason for this failure is not quite clear. It may have lain in the want of faith in the woman, or in the character of Gehazi, or more probably in a mistake on Elisha's part in supposing that he could communicate the power of the Spirit of God in this way. On coming to the house, Elisha found the body of the child laid upon his bed. With earnest prayer he stretched himself upon the lifeless form. Slowly the flesh of the child waxed warm with returning life. Stirred by the deep emotions of the occasion, the prophet paced up and down the room ; then, once more, he stretched himself upon the reviving body.<sup>a</sup> Fervent prayer was effectual, and the living child was restored to his mother, who fell once again at the prophet's feet, but this time with joy and gratitude.

51. **DEATH IN THE POT** (2 Kings iv. 38-41). This miracle does not immediately follow the preceding in order of time, but probably took place during the seven years' famine, of which we have an account in 2 Kings viii. 1. Gilgal (ii. 1), being one of the centres of prophetic teaching, had probably been often visited by Elisha, as by his master. The sons of the prophets were sitting before him, listening to the instruction he gave them for their work as the upholders of the true worship of Jehovah. The hour for their simple meal had come, and Elisha ordered his servant to prepare the vegetable soup which, with bread, formed their chief food. One of the members of the Society went out to gather field herbs, and in his search came upon

<sup>a</sup> Compare 1 Kings xvii. 21.

a plant with long tendrils like a wild vine. The fruit of this he gathered and shred into the pot. In his ignorance, however, he had brought in a poisonous fruit, but of what nature it is difficult to say. The word is translated "gourd" in our English version, and may be either a wild cucumber—an egg-shaped fruit, with a very bitter taste—or the poisonous "colocynth." None of the others seemed aware of the mistake, probably not noticing what their comrade had done; but when they began to sup, they knew, and cried out, "Death in the pot." Elisha met the threatened calamity by ordering them to bring meal, and cast it into the pot, when immediately the danger was removed; not because of the meal (ii. 21), but because of the power of Jehovah working through his servant.

**52. THE MIRACULOUS FEEDING** (2 Kings iv. 42-44). In this story there is evidence that the law of the Lord was not forgotten even among the people of the northern kingdom. A man of Baalshalishah brought to Elisha, as the prophet of Jehovah, an offering of the first fruits of his land.<sup>a</sup> This is the only mention of Baalshalishah, but it was probably near to Gilgal, in "the land of Shalishah," where Saul had searched for the lost asses (1 Samuel ix. 4). The offering consisted of twenty barley loaves, the food of the common people, and a sack<sup>b</sup> or wallet full of "fresh ears of corn."<sup>c</sup> Elisha gladly received the offering, as helping an immediate need, and ordered his

<sup>a</sup> Lev. xxiii. 14.

<sup>b</sup> Revised Version.

<sup>c</sup> Compare R.V. here and in Lev. 14, xxiii. 14.



“servitor”<sup>a</sup> to place the gifts before the people, probably sons of the prophets. As there were one hundred of these, the command seemed absurd ; but Elisha was able to assure his doubting servant that the Lord would make the supply more than sufficient. And so it proved.

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## CHAPTER VI.

53. NAAMAN AND THE KING (2 Kings v. 1-8). The record of domestic miracles is now interrupted to give in considerable detail the account of a miracle, which no doubt made a great impression in Samaria and throughout the Kingdom. In the service of the King of Syria, as Captain of the host, was Naaman,<sup>b</sup> a leper. His leprosy would in Israel have separated him from the rest of the community, but the custom in Syria does not seem to have enforced this ; for Naaman still held his place at the head of the army and as the personal attendant upon the King on official occasions. He was a brave and skilled soldier, quick to resent an insult, but kind and generous to those under him. He had repeatedly led the Syrians to victory, and it is noteworthy how the sacred historian here attributes such victories of Naaman to the help of

<sup>a</sup> The word is not the usual one for servant, and is once again used in 2 Kings vi. 15. Compare Exodus xxxiii. 11

<sup>b</sup> The name is already known in Scripture as that of a grandson of Benjamin ; Numbers xxvi. 40. Gen. xlvi. 21 (lxx.) agrees with this.

Jehovah.<sup>a</sup> In the household of Naaman, in attendance upon his wife, was a little maid captured in one of the raids made by irregular bands, and sold as a slave. She, like the others of Naaman's household, loved her master, and one day expressed the wish in her mistress's presence, that Naaman could visit the prophet of Israel, whose house was in Samaria. In the known hopelessness of a cure by ordinary means, the tales which the little maid was able to give of the wondrous miracles of Jehovah's prophet, so impressed others in the household, that one of them approached his master on the subject, and finally the king himself came to hear of it. The king readily gave the necessary permission to Naaman to journey to Israel, and sent by him a letter to Jehoram, practically demanding that the leprosy be removed. He did not deign to go into details with his weaker neighbour, and seems to have said nothing in the letter as to how the mission came about, or that the cure was expected through the prophet of Jehovah. It was for Jehoram to command the exercise of prophetic influence with Jehovah. The King of Israel, on reading the letter, gave never a thought to the prophet, whose power he had already witnessed (2 Kings iii. 17), but took the request to be an unjustified attempt to raise a quarrel against him. The arrival of such an embassy, and the reason for it, would stir the interest of the whole city, and Jehoram's despairing words would travel quickly from mouth to mouth, till at length the news was

<sup>a</sup> An ancient Jewish tradition identifies Naaman with the man who drew a bow at a venture, and slew Ahab.

brought to Elisha, whose home at the time was in Samaria. To his faith the request presented no difficulty, and a message was immediately sent to the distressed king, rebuking him for his forgetfulness of the power of Jehovah, and bidding Naaman present himself at the prophet's house. The King was thankful to escape a difficulty which threatened him with the wrath of Syria, and Naaman's expectations looked to the prophet rather than to the King. Accordingly the splendid cavalcade passed to the humble abode of Jehovah's representative, and stood before the door.

54. NAAMAN AND THE PROPHET (2 Kings v. 9-14). Coming in such state, Naaman naturally assumed that he would be treated according to his rank,—that Elisha would come forth, and in dramatic manner pronounce the cure. It cut into the pride of the Syrian to be taught that rank does not weigh with the King of kings. The only answer to the waiting noble and his rich retinue was a message by Gehazi, bidding Naaman go and wash in the Jordan seven times, when his flesh would "come again," and he would be clean. The attitude adopted by Elisha was not due to any disrespect for Naaman, nor to the fear of infection, or of being ceremonially unclean had he touched the leper, but in order to teach him that the God of Israel was not to be moved by rank or riches, and that the cure was wholly the work of God in response to faith on Naaman's own part. In great indignation Naaman turned and left the city. The treatment he had received at the hands of King and prophet was in neither case as he had expected. But the latter

especially had roused the wrath and national pride of the great man. That he should be treated with such scant courtesy was bad enough, but that he should be sent to wash seven times in the muddy waters of the Jordan was not to be endured. Were not Abanah and Parpar, rivers of Damascus, with their clear mountain waters, vastly superior to the "sluggish discoloured stream"<sup>a</sup> of the Jordan. He had yet to learn that the virtue was not in the waters, but in faith and obedience to the word of Jehovah. His servants, grieved at the possibility of a cure being missed, addressed him with affectionate reverence, pointing out that if he had been told by the prophet to do some great thing, he would unquestionably have done it. Why then should he refuse when the command was so simple as "wash and be clean." They could not appreciate the fall to Naaman's pride, but the man himself was too open-minded not to see the force of such reasoning. Forthwith he made his way to the despised Jordan, and dipped seven times in its waters. At the seventh time the word of the man of God was fulfilled, and Naaman came up from the river, his flesh "like unto the flesh of a little child." In obeying the injunction of Elisha, Naaman had learned that his cure was wholly due to the power of Jehovah, and that faith and obedience were necessary virtues in the worship of the God of Israel.

55. NAAMAN'S GRATITUDE (2 Kings v. 15-16). In a very different mood from that in which he left Samaria, Naaman returned, but now direct to the prophet's house. He was immediately admitted to

<sup>a</sup> Robinson.

the presence of Elisha, whom he met with the confession, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel." That was the lesson which Elisha desired to teach him, and this acknowledgment of Naaman's is the prophet's best reward. He had brought with him a royal gift,<sup>a</sup> judging the prophet of Jehovah to be as the priests of his own false gods; but Elisha will have none of it, for the gift of God is "without money and without price." The prophet had few wants of his own and no desire for riches, and especially was he unwilling at this time to take a reward, as if the cure of leprosy had been by any power of his. This refusal was fitted to impress Naaman with the spirituality of Jehovah worship, and to lift it high above the worship of the gods of his own land.

56. NAAMAN'S REQUESTS (2 Kings v. 17-19). So convinced was Naaman of the superiority of Jehovah to all other gods, that he determined henceforth to worship no other than the God of Israel. For this purpose he asked leave of the prophet to take two mules' burden of earth back with him to Syria. Although not actually stated, the request is so framed as to indicate that this earth was for the purpose of an altar to Jehovah, similar to other altars which he had no doubt seen during the progress of his visit. It may be that he still looked upon Jehovah as a territorial Deity, or thought at least that such

<sup>a</sup> The value of the gold and silver amounted to about £12,000 (Edersheim).

earth would be specially holy for the worship of the God of Israel.<sup>a</sup>

The second request of Naaman was even more remarkable. He had determined that henceforth he would worship only Jehovah. But immediately he remembered that his official duties required him to accompany the King into the Temple of Rimmon,<sup>b</sup> and along with the King bowing himself in the presence of the idol. He was well aware that any disrespect to the god of his King would be interpreted as treason against the person of the King. He therefore appealed to Elisha in his difficulty, to sanction this obeisance of the body before Rimmon. Elisha's reply, "go in peace," could only be interpreted by Naaman as amounting to the sanction sought. It would not, however, be right to infer that Elisha approved of the principle that worship of Jehovah and worship of Rimmon could in any way be reconciled. The point of Naaman's request was that he distinctly disavowed worship of Rimmon, and explained his act as due not to Rimmon but to the King. We must judge both of Naaman and of Elisha by the times in which they lived. Many in Israel (excluding, of course, the prophetic guild) saw no inconsistency in the joint worship of Baal and Jehovah; still less would they deny that the gods of other nations were real

<sup>a</sup> Naaman's desire would correspond with the story told of the Jews of a later time, who built the synagogue at Nahardea, in Persia, of stones brought from Jerusalem.

It is also interesting to remember that Baptisms in the English Royal family are administered with water taken from the Jordan.

<sup>b</sup> This is the only definite reference to the god Rimmon in the Bible, but there is a trace of the name in Tab-Rimmon (1 Kings xv. 18), and Hadad-Rimmon (Zech. xii. 11).

gods within their own borders. Naaman's religion was, in fact, in advance of many in Israel, and the imperfection of his service, which was more in appearance than in reality, was therefore overlooked. But Naaman as well as Elisha acknowledged that it was imperfect, and was only accepted in the special circumstances. The sanction accorded by the prophet has no application to our own time, possessing as we do the full revelation of the gospel, and the clear knowledge in Christ Jesus of the unity and the character of God. The principle behind Naaman's request is the definite acknowledgment that the worship of Jehovah cannot be combined with that of Rimmon, and a very remarkable acknowledgment it is in that time and by the Syrian convert of a day.

57. **THE LOVE OF RICHES** (2 Kings v. 20-24). One man who listened to the conversation between Elisha and Naaman was sorely disappointed at seeing this great company drive away from the prophet's door leaving nothing of their wealth behind. This was Gehazi, the attendant of Elisha, the covetous man in the Story of the Kings. If his master refused to profit by such an opportunity, then he saw no reason why he should be equally foolish. To make certain of accomplishing his end he followed Naaman, not in his own name but in that of his master. Naaman and his company had only gone a little way when one of them saw a man pursuing in hot haste. Before he came up to them he was recognised as the servant of the man of God, and Naaman, in a spirit of great respect, alighted from his chariot to meet him.

The story which Gehazi told had in it great plausibility. It was that two young men had just arrived from the hill country of Ephraim, and although his master would accept nothing for himself, he would be glad to have a talent of silver and two changes of raiment for these young men. Naaman was delighted at the opportunity of making some tangible return to the man of God, and pressed Gehazi, who needed little pressing, to take two talents. These, and the two changes of raiment, he sent by two of his own servants, who carried them before the wily Gehazi. To guard against detection Gehazi dismissed the men at a hill near to the prophet's house, whence, heavy as the load would be, he managed to convey his ill-gotten gain to some secret hiding-place. Then, so as to make his absence as little noticeable as possible, he immediately went in and stood before his master—that is, waited at hand ready to discharge any service.

58. "THE GREEDY OF GAIN TROUBLETH HIS OWN HOUSE" (2 Kings v. 25-27). Fear must have seized upon Gehazi when he heard his master's enquiry, "Whence comest thou, Gehazi?" There seemed nothing for him but to brazen out the matter with another lie, and the answer came readily from him, "Thy servant went no whither." Then Elisha turned upon him and laid bare the guile, reading off the visions of luxury which had stirred the cupidity of his servant—"the garments, and olive-yards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and men-servants, and maid-servants." He has been eager to secure something of Naaman's.



Let him now take with his ill-gotten gain the leprosy of Naaman, which he will hand down to his children along with his wealth. The expression in verse 26, "went not mine heart with thee," has given rise to much conjecture. It may mean (1) "was not my spirit present at the interview between you and Naaman?" (2) or in scornful contempt—"did my dear friend go nowhere when some one came down from his chariot to meet thee"; or (3) taking up Gehazi's innocent tone and words and resenting his profession of innocence—"Oh! you went no whither! then neither did I, and doubtless it is all delusion on my part that a certain man turned from his chariot to meet you." This last is the most probable meaning.

The punishment imposed on Gehazi may seem excessive, but the sin had peculiar aggravations. Elisha had taken pains to impress upon Naaman that his cure was wholly the work of Jehovah, in which the prophet himself had no other part than acquainting him with the Divine command. The difference between the pretensions of false prophets, with their incantations and acts of magic, and the true prophet, was further manifested by the solemn refusal of Elisha to take any gift for himself. Naaman expected something very different, and his conception of the spirituality and purity of the Jehovah worship was correspondingly heightened. The greed of Gehazi would do much to spoil this good impression, and reduce Elisha and the God whose servant he was to the level of the Syrian priests and deities. To add to all this, the sin was committed under the cloak of religion.

59. **THE LOST AXE-HEAD** (2 Kings vi. 1-7). From the detailed story of Naaman we pass to an incident within the domestic circle, and told in the brief way in which similar incidents in the prophet's life are given. At one of the centres of prophetic teaching, probably Jericho, the accommodation became too limited for the increasing numbers, who had banded themselves together in the interests of Jehovah worship. It happened that Elisha was at the time resident among them, and they appealed to him for permission to go to the Jordan, and there on the banks of the river, where wood was abundant, build more commodious premises. The undertaking would not be a very heavy burden if, as they proposed, each man would do his share in felling the necessary timber and building the houses. At the request of the men themselves, and to encourage them in their task, Elisha accompanied them to the scene of their labour. As the work proceeded, one of the members who was felling a beam right at the water's edge lost the head of his axe, which fell into the river. The loss was the more to be regretted as the axe was borrowed, no doubt specially for this occasion, when so many axes would be required for the work. The appeal of the man was answered by Elisha, who cut a stick, threw it into the water above the place where the axe-head fell, and immediately the iron floated on the surface and was recovered by the worker. This miracle is so contrary to our ideas, and so out of proportion to the loss incurred, that attempts have been made to find some simpler explanations of it. Accordingly, it has been thought that all that Elisha did was to

cut down a long stick, and, learning the exact spot where the axe sank (verse 6), stretched down the point of the stick into the hole for the handle and thus raised it to the surface.<sup>a</sup> There is nothing in the actual words of Scripture to forbid this interpretation. But it seems clear that the writer of the Book of Kings understood the incident as of a miraculous nature, otherwise it would not have had a place among the "wonders" which Elisha did.

60. **ELISHA AND THE SYRIANS** (2 Kings vi. 8-23). Elisha's life and ministry were very closely linked with the political and military history of his country. However much he disliked the idolatrous practices of her Kings, he had still hope for his country, and was ready to help her. The help of which this story tells us was probably rendered in the reign of Jehoram, the son of Ahab, though the narrative itself gives no indication of time. At the period in question, Syria was a most formidable adversary of Israel, and Israel's power was at such low ebb, that she was unable to protect her borders against marauding bands, who came at the instigation of the King of Syria. It was in this difficulty that Elisha was able to warn the King of Israel, so that the points of intended assault were carefully guarded, and any ambushade they may have intended to lay was frustrated. These repeated defeats of the Syrian plans suggested to the King that there was a traitor among his counsellors. On appealing to them he learned that "Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel," was the discloser of his

<sup>a</sup> "Made the iron to float."

plans. The thing which naturally occurred to the King of Syria was to lay hold upon Elisha, overlooking the fact that the God who enabled him to save Israel would take care to guard the prophet against the plans of the same King. Learning from spies that Elisha was at this time settled at Dothan,<sup>a</sup> a place rather less than twelve miles to the north of Samaria, the King sent hither horses and chariots, and a large body of infantry, who surrounded the town during the night. That such an act was possible so close to the capital of the kingdom is evidence of the helpless condition into which the country had fallen. In the early morning the servant of Elisha became aware of the trap in which the town was caught, and quite understood that the object of the Syrian host was to seize the person of his master. To him there seemed no way out of the difficulty, but Elisha was able to assure him that a greater host still was guarding God's servant.<sup>b</sup> In answer to Elisha's prayer, the eyes of his attendant were opened to the presence of the might of Jehovah, as an inner guard between the town and the Syrian army. Dothan stands upon a hill set in a plain of the same name, and while the Syrians had surrounded the foot of the hill, the host of God had surrounded the upper part upon which the town stood. Conscious of the Divine protection, prophet and servant descended the hill to where the Syrians were encamped.<sup>c</sup> On

<sup>a</sup> Gen. xxxvii. 17.

<sup>b</sup> Psalm xxxiv. 7; Zech. ix. 8.

<sup>c</sup> "They" in verse 18 must refer to Elisha and his servant; "him" should rather be "it"—the host (verse 15) or the singular pronoun standing for the Syrians. The singular form is used for "the Syrians" in verse 9.

approaching the enemy Elisha prayed to God that they might be struck with mental blindness, so that they would not recognise him<sup>a</sup> as the man they wanted, nor perceive that they were being led astray. Then he went boldly up to them with the words, "This is not the way, neither is this the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek." There is no doubt that Elisha took advantage of the condition into which the Syrians had been reduced, in persuading them that they had made a mistake in surrounding Dothan, and so led them into the power of the King of Israel. His conduct is on a par with the military strategy which attempts to lead the enemy off on a wrong line. Following the lead of Elisha, the Syrians marched upon Samaria, within whose strongly fortified walls their eyes were opened to the true state of the case, and they found themselves at the mercy of the garrison. The King, naturally delighted at finding the enemy in his power, was ready to exact dire vengeance by the slaughter of the whole host. But Elisha, in a fine spirit, not common in the Old Testament, and worthy of the Messiah of his nation, reproached the King for suggesting such a course, and bade him rather set meat and drink before his captives.<sup>b</sup> We are not surprised that such a merciful course purchased relief from the attacks of Syria for a season. But that relief could only have been very temporary. Notwithstanding the statement of verse 23, the following verse begins with the account of a Syrian invasion.

<sup>a</sup> Compare Luke xxiv. 16.

<sup>b</sup> Matthew v. 44; Romans xii. 20.

61. FAMINE IN SAMARIA (2 Kings vi. 24-29). If the Benhadad of this story is the same king who had already been twice defeated by Israel, he would rejoice in the present weakness of that land under Jehoram, as enabling him to accomplish his revenge. The account of the surrounding of Dothan shows how easily the Aramean host could pierce to the very heart of the country unopposed, and it is likely that Jehoram would in his fear have made submission to Benhadad, except for the exhortations and promises of Elisha. The engines of assault possessed in these times were incapable of reducing a strongly fortified city such as Samaria, so Benhadad encamped before it in order to compel submission by starvation. The weakness of Jehoram's rule probably meant that Samaria was but ill-provisioned for a long siege. The famine became so keen that an ass's head, which in other circumstances would not be used for food at all, was now sold for eighty pieces of silver,<sup>a</sup> and the fourth part of a kab of worthless pulse,<sup>b</sup> for five pieces of silver.<sup>c</sup> It was in such terrible straits as these that a horrible story came to the King's ears. Passing one day along the wall of the city, a woman flung herself before him with the cry, "Help, my lord, O king." The King, in the bitterness of his heart, replied to her, that since Jehovah would not help her, how could she expect the King to do so out of an empty threshing floor and a dry wine press?

<sup>a</sup> About £8 sterling.

<sup>b</sup> This is probably the meaning of the phrase "Dove's dung." Compare the Arabic name for *Herba alcali*, "Sparrow's dung"; The *Kab* is the smallest dry measure.

<sup>c</sup> About 12s. 6d.

But the cry of the woman was for justice, not food, and she laid before the King her claim. She and another woman had agreed to stave off the pangs of hunger by eating their own children.<sup>a</sup> Her son had been killed yesterday for their cannibal feast, and now to-day the other woman declined to fulfil her part of the bargain, and had hidden her son, although it was she who had first made the awful proposal.

62. THE KING'S DESPAIRING WRATH (2 Kings vi. 30, vii. 2). This gruesome appeal kindled the fury of the king against Jehovah, who had permitted such straits in Israel, and against Jehovah's representative, who had urged resistance, with promises of deliverance which had never come. The King had assumed the external sign of humiliation in wearing sackcloth next his flesh, but now he flung aside all allegiance to Jehovah, and vowed vengeance upon his prophet. Straightway a messenger was despatched to the prophet's house to execute the king's sentence. Elisha was seated at home, surrounded by the elders of the city, when he was made aware of the intentions of the king. He thereupon commanded the elders to shut the door in the messenger's face if any attempt were made to enter. Probably the king had no sooner despatched the messenger than he repented of his wrathful command, fearing the consequences of laying violent hands upon such a well-known prophet of Jehovah. At any rate, in company with one of his chief officers, he hastened to the house of Elisha, and while the prophet was yet disclosing

<sup>a</sup> Deut. xxviii. 52-58.

to the elders the king's intention, behold, the king himself<sup>a</sup> was at the door, pouring out reproaches against Jehovah, and implying either that he would submit to Benhadad, or that he would turn to Baal, his mother's god, for the help which Jehovah had never sent. Then, in the hour of man's despair, Elisha was permitted to announce definitely the coming relief. The King was thankful at any prospect of an end to the famine; but the officer accompanying him contemptuously replied, that the promise was only likely to be fulfilled if God opened windows in heaven and rained down flour and barley upon the city—contempt upon which Elisha pronounced its immediate penalty.

63. THE RELIEF OF THE CITY (2 Kings vii. 3-20). Without the help of man, Jehovah wrought that same night a great deliverance for Israel. In the darkening twilight of the evening a sudden panic took possession of the Syrian army. The huge heterogeneous armies of the East were ill disciplined and without organised sentries. They were therefore specially liable to these sudden panics.<sup>b</sup> Imagining that they heard the sound of a great host reverberating along the hills behind them, the rumour flew through the army that Jehoram had hired against them the Hittites<sup>c</sup> from the north and the Egyptians from the south, and that thus they were caught between the two. In the growing

<sup>a</sup> In vi. 33, for *Messenger* read *King*.

<sup>b</sup> Judges vii. 22.

<sup>c</sup> Recent discoveries confirm the Bible record of a great and widely-extended Hittite nation. Two of their chief cities were Carchemish and Kadesh, and from either quarter they could seriously threaten Benhadad's position.



darkness fear overmastered the Syrians, so that the whole host fled precipitately towards the north-east, leaving their camp behind them. The discovery of this sudden flight was made by four lepers, who, as was the custom, lived outside the walls of the city, and were driven by hunger to go over to the Syrian army on the bare chance of procuring food, knowing that to stay where they were, or to attempt to enter the city, equally meant death. They chose the night for their attempt, but on coming to the outermost tent of the Syrian encampment they could find no man, and were glad to enter in and satisfy the pangs of hunger; at the same time carrying away what silver and gold they could lay their hands upon. They quite realised that, for some reason or other, the Syrians had departed hurriedly, and before morning their thoughts turned to the starving city and their duty to their countrymen. There and then they set out for the city gate, and reported to the guard what they had discovered. The guard passed on the report to the palace, where the news was considered important enough to be straightway carried to the king. The king, forgetful of Elisha's promise of relief, put the whole thing down to a ruse on the part of Benhadad, which could by no means deceive such a wise man as Jehoram. But the mere prospect of food was too good to allow the chance to be lost, and the councillors of the King suggested that two chariots be sent out with the only five horses left in the city, in order to test the truth of the lepers' report. It was soon proved how complete was the discomfiture of the Syrians, for the road along which they

had fled was thickly strewn with garments and vessels, which they had flung away as their mad fear increased. Then was the word of Elisha fulfilled, and two measures of barley and one measure of fine flour were sold for a shekel each ; and the captain who had treated his prophecy so contemptuously was trodden to death in the rush of the starving people at the gate, where he had been placed in command by the King.

64. THE SHUNAMMITE HAS HER LAND RESTORED (2 Kings viii. 1-6). After an interval of some years we are introduced again to Gehazi, and the lady of Shunem. The famine referred to was probably that spoken of in iv. 38, but it is not easy to see why Elisha should have told the Shunammite to leave, who, when we first hear of her, was a woman of wealth and position. We can only surmise that in the interval her husband had died and that she herself had fallen into such poor circumstances that the long-continued famine would have pressed heavily upon her. At the prophet's warning, therefore, she and her son (there is no mention of her husband) moved into Philistia, where the famine, if it existed at all, would not be felt to the same extent as in the inland mountainous regions of Israel.<sup>a</sup> At the end of seven years the Shunammite and her son returned to their own country, only to find that her land had either been encroached upon by neighbours, or, which is more probable, had been seized on behalf of the crown as deserted by its owner. In either case her best

<sup>a</sup> Philistia is described by Dr George A. Smith in his "Historical Geography" as "an open doorway and a great thoroughfare amidst the traffic and the war of two continents."

chance of recovering the property was to present her case to the King in person. For this purpose she journeyed to Samaria. She came at a providential moment. In the open courtway, or the gate of the city where justice was often administered, the King was talking with Gehazi about the great work of his master, Elisha. This seems to have been before the cure of Naaman and the leprosy of Gehazi; for it is most improbable that a King of Israel would be in close converse, in a public place, with a man afflicted to such an extent with leprosy. Among the "great things" of which Gehazi spoke was the raising of the Shunammite's son from death, and just at that moment the woman of Shunem presented herself before the King and claimed the royal justice. Immediately Gehazi, who had been often at her house with his master, recognised the suppliants as the woman and son of whom he had just been telling the King. The interest of the King was thus aroused on her behalf, and from her own lips he had again the story of that great miracle, and readily granted her petition. He even appointed an officer to see that she was put into possession of her land and to restore to her, out of the royal stores, the equivalent of all the produce of the land during the seven years of her absence.

## CHAPTER VII.

65. ELISHA IN DAMASCUS (2 Kings viii. 7-10). Whether it was that Elisha's relations with the King of Israel became so strained that the prophet found it advisable to withdraw to Damascus for a season, or that he went to fulfil the commission first given to Elijah at Sinai, it is evident that his name was well known to the courtiers of Benhadad. That would be accounted for, among other things, by Elijah's treatment of the soldiers of Benhadad, when they were enticed to Samaria, and by the cure of Naaman, if that occurred previous to this visit, which is doubtful. When Elisha arrived in the neighbourhood of Damascus, Benhadad was lying ill. He knew the fame of Elisha as a man of God, and desired to learn through him whether he would recover from this sickness. The officer chosen as the King's messenger was Hazael, one of the high officers of State. He was bidden to take presents of "every good thing of Damascus," and to load these upon forty camels, not that each camel would be fully laden, but the number would make a greater display. This was quite in accordance with the recognised custom, that every approach to Deity must be with presents corresponding to the rank and wealth of the suppliant. We are not told whether Elisha accepted these gifts, but everything we know of him points to a refusal of such wealth. The simple life led by the prophets of Jehovah put them beyond the temptation to sell

their office for gain. "They rose above human fears because they stood above human desires." The intention of Benhadad was not only to know the result of his illness, but, according to heathen ways, to gain the prophet's influence with God that a favourable issue might be granted. Hazael approached the prophet in a humble tone, as became the messenger of a suppliant,—“thy son Benhadad, king of Syria, hath sent me to thee, saying, Shall I recover of this sickness?” The answer of Elisha has given rise to some difficulty. He appears to give authority to Hazael to say to the King that he would recover, while plainly telling Hazael for his own information that the King would surely die. There are three possible interpretations of the passage : (1) that Elisha gave one message for the King and an opposite for the private information of Hazael. This would imply a not very strict regard for truth, and while other interpretations are open, we are not warranted in attributing this to a man of the office and character of Elisha ; (2) that Elisha said that Benhadad would surely recover from this sickness which carried no fatal issue, but at the same time conveyed to Hazael the knowledge that by some violent means the King would shortly die ; (3) that the first part of Elisha's reply was spoken in a tone of contempt for the hypocrisy of Hazael, implying that whatever the prophet might say, Hazael, playing the courtier to the last, would convey a favourable reply to the King ; nevertheless the prophet had clear knowledge that Benhadad would die.

66. **THE SCOURGE OF GOD** (2 Kings viii. 11-13). But Elisha had to do with Hazael in another capacity than as messenger for Benhadad. While Hazael stood waiting before him, the prophet of Israel looked upon the Syrian with a fixed, intent gaze, as if reading the innermost thoughts of the man; and then, as the vision of the future became clear, tears flowed down the cheeks of the patriot-prophet. Such conduct on Elisha's part became exceedingly embarrassing to Hazael, who enquired the reason for this sorrow. In answer, the prophet read off the blood-red vision, revealing the scourge which this man before him would yet prove to Israel.<sup>a</sup> The revelation, described though it was with painful literalness, in no way shocked Hazael. In his eyes the picture was one of military glory, of conquest, with its attendant massacres, wherein the accompaniment of suffering and death to others was a small thing. Yet, though his heart leaped with joy at the possible realisation of his dreams, he kept up the semblance of humility in his reply: "What is thy servant, the dog, that he should do this great thing?"<sup>b</sup> Elisha was in no way deceived by the wily, ambitious Syrian, but answered that the throne of Syria was his ambition, and he would yet reach it.

67. **THE MURDER OF BENHADAD** (2 Kings viii. 14-15). As Elisha had foreseen, Hazael returned to the King with a favourable reply, well knowing that he was deluding his master with a

<sup>a</sup> 2 Kings x. 32; xii. 17-18; xiii. 3, 22.

<sup>b</sup> The rendering of A.V. loses sight of the force of the definite article, "the dog." The R.V. makes it, "But what is thy servant, which is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?"

false hope. At the same time, he himself prepared to take possession of the throne the moment of the King's death. The record given of Benhadad's murder is usually interpreted as making out Hazael to be the regicide. That is not at all unlikely, yet not quite certain. Verse 15 can be read, "And it came to pass on the morrow, that one took the thick cloth, and dipped it in water, and spread it on his face, so that he died; and Hazael reigned in his stead." The grounds which favour this view are (1) that Hazael is not indicated by the prophet as the murderer of the King; (2) that the word rendered "the thick cloth" (with definite article) points to the bath-cloth, dipped in warm water (always used for baths in the East), and drawn so tightly over the King's head that he was smothered. This would make the bath-servant (who could not be Hazael) to be the actual murderer, though the servant may have been instigated by a conspiracy of higher officers; (3) that if Hazael is the subject of the verb "took" at the beginning of the verse, the subsequent repetition of his name would be superfluous. Giving all these reasons their full value, they will not carry more than a verdict of "not proven."

68. THE ANOINTING OF JEHU (2 Kings ix. 1-6). The enmity between the followers of Jehovah, as represented by the prophets, and the house of Ahab, was never allowed to be forgotten, and now the day of vengeance for the sins and idolatry of Ahab and his sons was fully come. Jehoram, the king of Israel and son of Ahab, had gathered an army at Ramoth Gilead to withstand the advance

of the Syrians under Hazael, who was now become king. During the progress of the war, Jehoram had been wounded, and retired to Jezreel, leaving Jehu as captain in charge. This was the opportunity for the overthrow of the dynasty of Omri. Jehu had been one of the two officers in attendance upon Ahab when the vengeance of God was pronounced at the vineyard of Naboth, and could never forget that scene nor the words uttered by Elijah.<sup>a</sup> It was this same Jehu, a man of subtle cunning, of irresistible vehemence, and with a savage lust for blood, who was now urged by a messenger from Elisha to undertake the task of executing the vengeance of the Lord upon the house of Ahab and the priests of Baal. The incitement to revolt was to reach Jehu secretly, and therefore Elisha, instead of going himself, despatched one of the sons of the prophets to the camp at Ramoth Gilead to anoint Jehu king over Israel, and to commission him at the same time to exact the penalty of the crimes of Omri and his successors. In hot haste the young man sped to the house where Jehu and his brother officers sat in council, called Jehu to the inner room, and there anointed him for his terrible work. The appearance of this strange figure, rushing unceremoniously into the midst of the officers, naturally aroused their curiosity as to what had taken place in that inner room. Jehu at first parried their questions, doubting whether the time was ripe to reveal all; and then, risking everything in that bold way characteristic of him, declared the purpose of their wild-looking visitant. Immediately, as if moved by one

<sup>a</sup> 2 Kings ix. 25-26.



spirit, they all rose, saluted him as king, and, in token of their homage, cast their cloaks upon the bare steps<sup>a</sup> of the house whence Jehu was about to come forth.

69. OVERTHROW OF THE HOUSE OF AHAB (Compare 2 Chron. xxii.)—(1) *Jehoram and Ahaziah* (2 Kings ix. 11-29). Jehu acted with swift determination. Bidding his adherents see that no one left the town to carry the news of the revolt to Jezreel, he himself, with a picked bodyguard, hurried with all speed to where the king, along with his nephew Ahaziah king of Judah, was enjoying convalescence. Approaching Jezreel, he swept along regardless of the messengers sent out to know what news he brought. On the announcement by the watch on the tower of the palace, that the driving indicated the well-known tumultuous speed of Jehu, the son of Nimshi, Jehoram realised that something very serious must have happened at Ramoth Gilead, and himself and his royal guest proceeded in their chariots to meet Jehu. On the two parties drawing near to each other in the neighbourhood of the plot which had belonged to Naboth, Jehoram perceived from the abuse which Jehu flung at him that treason was the explanation of his captain's presence. With a warning cry to Ahaziah, he turned his chariot to flee back to the city. But Jehu was too quick for him, and an arrow from the bow of the conspirator ended the reign of the weak and unfortunate King, whose body was flung into the field of Naboth.

<sup>a</sup> That they heaped up their cloaks on the top step to form a seat or temporary throne is unlikely.

Bidding part of his company pursue the king of Judah, he himself sped on to Jezreel. Ahaziah was followed and wounded at the going up to Gur, but succeeded in reaching Megiddo, where he died.<sup>a</sup>

70. **OVERTHROW OF THE HOUSE OF AHAB**  
 —(2) *Jezebel* (2 Kings ix. 30-37). Already the palace was astir with the cry of treason, and Jezebel the Queen-mother prepared to meet Jehu with bold contempt. The answer of Jehu to her upbraiding was a call to those who favoured his cause to fling the Queen from the window to the pavement below, where the rush of the chariots as Jehu and his guard swept past completed the effects of the fall. Later, when Jehu, remembering her royal dignity (for she was the daughter, the wife, and the mother of a king), ordered her burial, nothing was to be found of the proud Queen except “the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands.”

71. **OVERTHROW OF THE HOUSE OF AHAB**  
 —(3) *The seed royal* (2 Kings x. 1-17, xi. 1-3). These first acts of Jehu were followed by others no less terrible. They were all done in the name of religion, yet were all made to serve the ambitions of the new King. By a mixture of guile and threats he got rid of all the sons of Ahab, making the rulers or elders of Samaria <sup>b</sup> the instruments of his vengeance. Then by what he would regard as a providential meeting, he was able to lay hands upon all the brethren of Ahaziah, King of Judah, and in one pitiless act of slaughter swept them from his path.

<sup>a</sup> 2 Chron. xxii. 9 says he was caught hiding in Samaria, and, by order of Jehu, put to death.

<sup>b</sup> “Rulers of Jezreel” (x. 1) should probably read rulers of “Israel” or “the city.”

Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab, and now queen of Judah, on hearing of the death of her husband, Ahaziah, seized the throne for herself, and with somewhat of the spirit of Jehu, slew all the seed royal with the exception of Joash, who was saved by Jehosheba, the half-sister of Ahaziah.

Thus, in pursuance of the ambitions of Jehu in Israel and Athaliah in Judah, was the house of Omri cut off from the land, and the vengeance of God, delayed from the days of Ahab, fell with fearful effectiveness upon the family which had wrought such sin in Israel.

**72. OVERTHROW OF BAAL WORSHIP** (2 Kings x. 18-28). One other task lay before Jehu, and he carried it out in the same spirit of savage cunning. Summoning a great assembly of the priests and worshippers of Baal on the false plea of doing honour to Baal as the recognised god of the land, he gathered into Samaria the whole following of Baal under penalty of death in case of refusal. The profession of the new King was so vehemently in favour of Baal that the followers of the false god readily fell into the trap. On a day appointed for a special act of worship, all gathered into the "house of Baal" in Samaria. Jehu kept up the hypocrisy to the end, and then, having made sure that all present were followers of Baal, he went out to the guard of soldiers who had already surrounded the building, and bade them go in and slay until none were left alive. He followed up this massacre by destroying the temple of Baal, the pillars, and the images. "Thus Jehu destroyed Baal out of Israel."

**73. DEATH OF ELISHA** (2 Kings xiii. 14-21).

It is clear that there is a long blank in the story of the life of Elisha. For nearly sixty years he was the great religious force in the land, and on many occasions the guide of her policy at home and abroad. Yet for more than forty years we have no record at all (unless some of the miracles fall within this period) of how that time was spent, or how that influence told upon the history of his native country. It is evident from the closing scene that during the reign of Jehu and his two successors, a time of trouble and weakness for the land, the one defence against hopeless disaster was the patriot prophet who, now stricken in years, lay upon his death-bed. The news of Elisha's sickness was brought to King Joash, who at once hastened to the bedside of the old man. A glance at the pale shrunken face told the King that the end was near. Realising how great would be the loss to the nation, the King wept over the face of the prophet, with words which had first come from the lips of Elisha himself more than fifty years ago, when, on the hither side of Jordan, Elijah's inspiring presence passed from earth. In that last meeting between prophet and king, Elisha once again proved the truth which Joash, in a moment of rare insight, recognised. Telling the King to take his bow, and to open the window that looked toward the east, he laid his hands upon the King's hands and bade him shoot. Joash shot three arrows in succession eastwards in the direction of Syria, and then stayed. This hesitancy and indecision of Joash was the characteristic which marked his reign, and now aroused the sorrowful wrath of the prophet, who told him that

had he shot five or six times he would have utterly defeated Syria ; whereas now he would defeat her three times, yet not to an extent sufficient to break the power of his strong and dangerous neighbour.

Thus, loving his country to the last, serving her with truest devotion, the aged prophet passed into the rest and peace of God.





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